



The Crush by FioSummers

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Summary: AU, the Party meets in London while doing their master's degree. Against her better judgement, El starts to fall for Mike, your typical player with commitment issues. On top of that, they develop a rocky friendship filled with petty bantering, sexual tension and a bit of jealousy. Will they get it together before the year is up?

1. September

"The Crush"

Disclaimer: I don't own Stranger Things or its characters. No money is being made from this fic.

Plot: AU, the Party meets in London while doing their master's degree. Against her better judgement, El starts to fall for Mike, your typical player with commitment issues. On top of that, they develop a rocky friendship filled with petty bantering, sexual tension and a bit of jealousy. Will they get it together before the year is up?

Notes: This is AU and slow burn, very slow burn (sorry).

September

Jane Eleonor Hopper landed in London on the warmest day of that year. The sun was bright, the air hot and the day seemed endless. There were people all around the Thames, some running, some sight-seeing; others just rushing through the crowds trying to make their way home.

El, as her friends and family called her, couldn't contain her excitement to begin this amazing adventure. She would be living in the city for the next academic year, coursing through a master's degree in one of London's top universities with a full scholarship. She had felt a bit gloomy about leaving her home but when the idea that she would be living in one the greatest cities of the world finally sunk in, she got excited beyond any blues.

Those first days in the city involved some shopping for groceries and home essentials to settle in. Her dorm was close to the university's main campus in South London and though El thought it wasn't the coolest part of town, it was somewhat convenient. Particularly, she enjoyed having a cinema just around the corner from her dorm and the university gym just five minutes away.

Soon, any remnants of sadness and longing for home were chased

away as she quickly dived into the London lifestyle with unbelievable ease. With a week to go before university started, she decided to see as much as she could before schoolwork and classes got in the way. She went to the theatre, visited some museums and got to know the famous royal parks (her favorite being Regent's Park). El also went to food markets like the Borough Market, ate at some renown coffee shops and pubs, and toured most of the main land marks.

She even met a few people that first week at her dorm's welcome party. Of all the people she met, her favorite were Antoine, a handsome French student mastering in human rights law who lived in the flat next door; and Marina, a geeky Spanish with a great sense of humor that shared her passion for Harry Potter and who had the same scholarship as hers. She was studying a master's in political science and like Antoine, lived just a few doors away.

Soon the first the day of classes arrived. Tuesday morning found El entering her Research and Critical Thinking class, a course every master's student had to take in order to improve their research skills for dissertation writing.

Apart from her teacher, a redheaded British woman from Hackney, with a loud voice and contagious joyful attitude; the class was uneventful. There were students from different parts of the world but El didn't really pay attention to any of them, focusing on getting the most out of the lesson.

Being a graduate in Psychology, El enjoyed doing research and writing, preferring the academic field to the practical side of her profession. Therefore, the RCT classes would come in handy if she wanted to get a good grade in her dissertation and any essay she would be writing for her other classes.

Her next class that Tuesday was apparently a very popular one, given the massive attendance and the varieties of backgrounds she could spot. And at that point she couldn't imagine that Social Psychology would prove to be one of the toughest courses she would take that year.

El chose to sit in the back, near the backdoor in the aisle of her row.

The teacher, an Irish woman named Moira Hewson was something else. Boisterous, loud and hilarious, the tall woman spoke often of her children –all boys–, her husband and her farm in Ireland. Her experiences, mixed with her extensive knowledge on the subject, made El enjoy the class immensely. Even though it meant to always come prepared for questions and to do the readings assigned to each lesson thoroughly and without fault.

Just before the class started, a group of four guys and a redheaded girl made their way into the classroom. The girl, Max Mayfield, waved at El and took a sit with her friends closer the front. El waved back and smiled at Max while curiously staring at her companions.

El had met Max the weekend before classes started, at a field trip organized by the university to a lovely countryside lodge. The trip was an annual tradition where you got in by luck and it was meant to encourage the new students to socialize and make friends. It was there where both girls met, when they were assigned seats together in the bus. They immediately hit it off, talking a bit about themselves and realizing they shared similar interests and the same dry humor.

Max's friends were laughing at something one of them said as El kept watching them intently; she hadn't seen any of them before that day. Out of the four friends, El couldn't help but look at the tallest one, a lanky guy whose wild, black hair almost covered his eyes. He was dressed in black jeans and a navy-blue sweater over a white shirt and to El's amusement, he was carrying a blue, vintage, Doctor Who backpack.

Huh...cute. She thought with interest. Soon El's thoughts were interrupted by Moira's introduction to Social Psychology and the beginning of the lesson. Any musings over 'tall and lanky' forgotten for the time being.

When the class finished, El packed her things and made her way to the front of the building where Max and the guys were chatting. Max motioned for her to join them and that's how El met Mike Wheeler, Mr. Tall and Lanky himself.

"Hey El! These are my 'sort of friends', I mean, we only met last week!" She said laughing at one of the guy's offended expression. El

just smiled.

"The martyr here making a face is Dustin". The curly haired boy waved smilingly. "This is Lucas, Will and that one consumed by his phone is Mike". She said while signaling to each of them and scolding at Mike for not paying attention.

A chorus of: "Hey El, nice to meet you" and a "Sorry Max" followed and El couldn't keep the smile off her face. This was going to be fun.

"Hi, it's nice to meet you all". She said waving her hand. Mike smiled at her briefly and then returned to his phone. Fleetingly, she couldn't help but wonder what was so interesting about it...however she soon shrugged it off and turned back to the others.

"So, guys what do you say if we hit the pub?" Lucas asked. Of course, being London there was a pub in every corner. Literally.

They all agreed and made their way to The Marlowe's, a pub just around the corner from the Psychology Postgraduate building in Marylebone. They found a nice table and went to order their drinks. Soon enough they were sitting chatting about their classes that day, specifically Moira's, with Dustin going on about how cool their professor was.

"I think Moira is awesome. So much knowledge and so charismatic..."

"You just have the hots for her Dustin". Mike interrupted wiggling his eyebrows in a suggestive manner, while raising his pint in mock toast. The others just burst out laughing.

"Oh, fuck off Wheeler! I saw you checking her out too!" He said rolling his eyes.

"No way dude, no even if hell freezes over! Though as a teacher I do think she is pretty cool and super smart too". Mike added thoughtfully.

"She is quite amazing, it's like she's been around the biggest brains of Social Psychology in the last 20 years or so". El agreed while taking a sip of her cider.

"So, what's El short for? Elena? Elizabeth? Eleven?" Lucas asked grinning at his own lame joke.

"Hahahahahahaha Eleven!" Mike snorted with laughter, the others soon joined in.

How childish were these guys? El wondered, slightly irritated.

"Is short for Eleonor". She clarified with a light smile. "My friends call me El".

"Hmm...". Mike considered her explanation for a second, touching his chin as if in deep thought.

"Hmm no, I happen to like Eleven better". He concluded smugly, looking at her with a self-satisfied grin.

El thought he looked just like the Cheshire cat from Alice in Wonderland. She rolled her eyes and laughed. They were definitely funny, she at least had to give them that.

The night went on talking about school, professors and people. Relationships also made it into the conversation and El learned that all of them were single, just planning to have a nice year abroad. Mike was the one brought up the subject, he seemed to enjoy talking about that kind of thing, like asking about what type of women or guys they were into; and talking about the women he had dated.

She thought he was a bit crass given the way he talked about his past flings. From what she gathered that night he wasn't really someone she would want to date. Cute and smart, yes; but a player who probably treated women poorly. Not really worth much thinking on her part, she decided categorically.

Little did she know though, that Mike Wheeler would end up viciously consuming her thoughts in the months to come.

2. October

October

September turned into October and El got used to her life in London. She enjoyed her classes and her friends immensely and quickly a routine was established. She would go to class on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays and to the gym near her place from Monday through Friday. Nights were for catching up with the news, her friends and family back home and to enjoy the London nightlife when possible. Because, of course, sometimes nights were also for studying and catching up on her reading assignments.

Going out with the people from her building had become a common occurrence. She had gone to the cinema with Marina a couple of times and to an orientation event from their scholarship's sponsors. They had also gone to a university party in a posh London club. There she had run into a slightly tipsy Antoine, who spend the rest of the night flirting and dancing with her. El found she quite liked him, at least until the next morning when she found out he was engaged while browsing through his Instagram profile. No steamy French romance for her then...

El got along greatly with her friends from her master's, which basically were Dustin, Lucas, Will, Max and Mike; or the Party as Dustin liked to call them. Besides Max, her favorite was Will, with whom she had bonded through their taste in music and their love for art. She enjoyed Lucas' and Dustin's humor and their seemingly never-ending, geeky-related banter. Plus, they shared her love for food, especially Dustin, who, much as she did, always carried around a stash of snacks.

And with Mike...well, they got along fine. Sort of...

In classes, she started noticing that he would always sit beside her, particularly in Moira's class. She actually didn't mind this, he didn't talk much during the lesson and when he did, it was to say something that would make her laugh or to participate in the class discussion. His comments were usually interesting and very well thought. She liked that he wouldn't just talk for the sake of participating, but that

he would bring something of value to the discussion.

Interestingly, it was a different story when they were with their friends. With the Party together, he would tease her mercilessly about the stupidest things, it was almost as if he liked to have an audience. It became a cycle of sorts: he would tease her about something childish (her hair, her choice in dresses, the way she talked, etc.) and they would bicker constantly until one of them –basically her– would roll their eyes and ignore the other to join the group's conversation.

On one occasion, while they were walking to a pub '*The Mike and El show*' (as their friends secretly called their bickering relationship), displayed one of its very first episodes. El was leading the group through the sidewalk, chatting excitedly with Max about the latest Marvel film when Mike's voice sharply broke through their conversation calling her by his stupid nickname for her.

"Eleven?" Mike asked in that sweet tone she knew meant trouble.

"Hey Eleven?" One more time, she ignored him.

"Eleven?" At the third time she snapped.

"What?!" She asked, visibly exasperated.

"Your legs are so pale". He remarked simply.

What the...? El couldn't finish her thought as she blurted out her reply without much thinking.

"Stop checking me out then Mike." She said irreverently, rolling her eyes at him in distaste.

Mike struggled to hide his smile at her response.

"Hmm it's kinda hard, you're walking in front of me wearing a skimpy dress and showing all that sallowness...is impossible to look away". He responded deviously.

"Oh, for the love of god dude! Leave me be, will you? Just walk ahead then!" She shouted, losing her cool completely, to his amusement and that of their friends.

He looked at her appreciatively, with an intensity that confused her a little; a confusion that grew exponentially as she heard his reply.

"No thanks, I'm quite well right here". He answered smugly.

"Then shut up!" She snapped, red with embarrassment for her outburst and his blunt (*flirty?*) comments right in front of their friends.

These episodes between Mike and El were becoming more and more frequent as the group grew closer. El wasn't precisely annoyed by them, truthfully, she would laugh most of the time. However, it wasn't until a couple of weeks later that she realized that the nature of his teasing might be because he wanted her attention on him constantly.

Her theory was born one night the party decided to go for Peruvian food. On that particular Thursday's night, ceviche was at the top of everyone's cravings' list, so they booked a table in a small Peruvian place near Euston Square and headed there after class. As they arrived, they quickly sat and ordered their drinks and ceviches, chatting animatedly about classes and about some of their classmates. They were talking about this guy who dressed like a 60's singer and who seemed like he hadn't had a proper shower in a while.

"It's so weird guys, can't he see how bad he looks? All smelly and sweaty?" Lucas commented with a deep frown on his face.

El crinkled her nose in disgust at the thought but was too absorbed in her food to comment.

"Yeah Eleven, 'cause we all know how much of a snob you are". Said Mike out of the blue, startling her out of her reverie.

"Wha...I wasn't even talking! And for the hundredth time don't call me Eleven!" She exclaimed defensively, probably a bit too loud.

Mike just laughed wholeheartedly.

"See how she didn't deny being a snob?" He asked the others while signaling towards her as if she was a piece of evidence in a trial.

"I'm not!"

"Of course you are. With your fancy food and your whole... overachiever vibe you've got going on". He retorted, motioning with his hand in circles, as if trying to demonstrate the surrounding area of her supposed vibe.

El was fuming.

"I don't eat 'fancy', I just eat healthy! Something that clearly escapes your understanding! And I'm not an overachiever, I like to study, and I have a scholarship to uphold!". She said heatedly, turning a nice shade of red.

Mike just stared at her intently, while the others watched soundlessly not knowing if it was a good idea to butt in or not. After a heartbeat that lasted an eternity in El's head, he finally replied.

"So much passion Eleven..." He said quietly, eyes fixed on her piercingly before smiling cheekily at her and taking a sip of his beer.

She looked away, uncomfortable under his scrutiny and reddening even more.

And then, it hit her.

For the first time since she met Mike, she realized that he liked to say things that would get a rise out of her. That he seriously enjoyed seeing her flustered and annoyed. She was used to him teasing her all the time, but she had never given it much thought; knowing he was like that with everyone else.

However, now that she really thought about it, she did seem to be the object of most of his mockery. Sure, he teased the others, but somehow, he always found a way to drag her in. Just like now, she was minding her own business, eating calmly and bam! He drags her into the conversation just to see her irritated.

Hmm, I wonder why...?

She shot him a glare and he laughed harder, to her utter frustration of course.

"Ohhhh you two...you two are gonna end up doing it! I can just feel the tension already. Always fighting and teasing each other. All that flirting!" Max intervened mischievously, getting El out of her elucubrations.

"You're right Max, I can feel the sexual electricity". Said Dustin with a huge knowing grin.

What?... The horror!

"What? No way!" El said, flushed and shaking her head in denial. "Like...like you actually think two haters can cancel each other out and make lovers?"

What are you saying El!? Stop making up nonsense.

She was mortified.

"I don't know honey, you're the one who came up with that hypothesis all by your lonesome self". Max gently told her, never mind the deviously sassy smile plastered on her face.

"No way!" She said obstinately and averted her eyes from Mike's gaze. He just laughed and kept on eating nonchalantly, before he intervened.

"I just enjoy messing with you, you get so worked up about things". He said after a beat, insolently, with that roguish smile of his and confirming El's theory that he had a penchant for teasing her more than the others.

Wait, roguish? Since when do I categorize Mike's smiles?

Oh god. Oh god. Oh. God. No way I could ever like Mike. Not ever. He's trouble. Oh god, just keep drinking your wine woman! Don't say anything else!

The others just laughed and changed the subject, leaving them alone. El went back to eating and enthusiastically delved into the conversation, trying by all means to move on from the awkward incident. In the end, the night was fun. They finished their food and went to a nearby pub for more drinks until closing time, when

everyone decided to go home.

But the damage was already done.

As she walked home, El couldn't get the idea of Mike and 'a potential something with him', out of her head. And this bothered her. A lot.

She didn't like Mike. 'They' would be a terrible idea.

He's just too chaotic and childish, never mind his tendency to like other women too much...

And they were friends, well sort of, when they weren't at each other's throats...

In sum: he was a complication El didn't need in her life.

Though god knows he's hot as hell...and smart...And who said he liked her anyway? Or that I like him for that matter?

Damn Max for getting these thoughts into my head!

And that night would be remembered by El as the night that started it all.

3. November

November

A month after the Peruvian place, El couldn't seem to escape Mike. Well, at least in her head. In real life he was just as obnoxious as usual, but in her thoughts, she couldn't help but wonder constantly about him. What did he do outside school when he wasn't with them? How much did he really date? What kind of women was he out with? Because for all he talked and bragged in the beginning, he was quite discreet about his dates these days...or so she thought anyway.

Essentially, El was torturing herself.

It didn't matter that she spent time with the friends in her dorm, or even that she and Antoine had gone out a couple of times (strictly platonic mind you...strangely though, he had yet to mention his fiancé...); or her outings with Will to see the coolest bands; Mike was always lurking in the background. Metaphorically of course. *Or was it a simile?*

The bug Max had planted in her head refused to go away, growing stronger instead. She was beginning to think that maybe it had been there all along and that Max had just made her realize it existed.

No, it can't be. And this is not me being in denial!

The girl in question suddenly interrupted her thoughts and El tried hard to focus on her friends and the pub they were in. For once, without Mike.

"So, our Mike is a bit down about the whole Jennifer thing". Max commented casually as she poured ketchup all over her fries.

"What Jennifer thing?" El asked, abruptly looking up from her salad.

"You know, Mike drooling all over Jennifer. That thing". Dustin answered her, as if the information was yesterday's news.

"Really? I didn't know he liked Jennifer?" Jennifer Hayes was some blonde bimbo –in El's honest opinion– who was in their program as

well, and that thought she was God's gift to men –also in El's more than honest opinion–.

"Oh yeah El, he's been like obsessed with her since September". Will said as a matter-of-factly.

Oh.

How come I didn't know about this?

"Yeah, they've gone out a couple of times, but I'm not sure how serious this thing is". Lucas added.

"I think is not too serious, I mean this is Mike we are talking about, right?" Dustin said, eagerly munching on his burger.

They all laughed. El just felt as if a bucket of icy water had been dropped over her head.

"But I mean what really happened? Did she dump him or something?" Max continued.

"I think she did, you know before Mike could get to his favorite part..." Lucas answered, smiling knowingly while arching his eyebrows up and down suggestively.

Meanwhile, El was trying very hard to swallow the bit of chicken in her mouth, suddenly not tasty at all.

Well it's not like it's any of your business, right? You don't like him remember? He can do whatever he wants!

She silently finished her salad, not really enjoying it anymore. Her friends, oblivious to her internal struggle, carried on gossiping about, laughing as if they had not a care in the world.

The startling disappointment she felt sink in, deep in the pit of her stomach at the news of Mike's infatuation with Jennifer; made El contemplate the possibility that maybe, just maybe, she did have a tiny crush on Mike Wheeler.

It wasn't a secret that El loved food. She would eat constantly throughout the day, even during class when she felt hungry. Mostly healthy snacks like fruits and energy bars, though she also loved chocolate and desserts, craving them constantly after dinner or lunch. Her theory was that London's usually cold weather made her want chocolate even more, so she always carried some with her.

El's food antics seemed to amuse her friends tremendously, provoking jokes and teasing non-stop. In response, El would just giggle and dive into an explanation about how eating constantly and healthy was good for your brain and overall health. She was a foodie and she loved it.

Mike, in particular, enjoyed this side of El. Or at least she thought he did. He would steal bits from her chocolates all the time and would always welcome in his plate the things El didn't enjoy eating, such as bacon or sausages. It was almost a non-spoken rule between them, if she didn't want something on her plate, Mike would eat it.

On that Thursday night, Mike was hungry. The group was seated in the back of the auditorium as per usual, listening to Moira while Mike was campaigning via text messages for them to stay and eat something after class. Knowing that El would probably be hungry as well, he appealed to her to join him and talk the others into staying.

Of course, El was hungry and she definitely wanted to eat something after class.

As soon as Moira's lesson ended, the party headed outside.

"Ok who's in?!" Mike asked excitedly.

"Sorry buddy, I have a thing tonight". Dustin answered apologetically.

"Yeah, so do we man". Said Lucas, referring to him and Max.

"And me! Sorry guys!" Will exclaimed, looking somewhat nervous.

If El didn't know any better, she would think their friends were setting them up. Did they know she sort of liked Mike? No, that wasn't possible. She didn't even know it herself until a couple of days ago. And she was still in denial. No way she liked Mike Wheeler.

Mike stared at them suspiciously for a second, but he did not comment.

"Fine. Suit yourselves, see you on Monday nerds". He said, lazily waving his hand in a dismissive gesture.

"Bye guys! Have a nice weekend". El said sweetly. The party said their goodbyes, flipping Mike off for his 'nerds' comment and went on their way.

"I guess it's just you and me Eleven...lucky you!" Mike remarked complacently, glancing at her from his side of the sidewalk. El just rolled her eyes dramatically.

"So where do you want to eat?"

"Wherever you like Eleven".

"Pub?" She suggested, and he crinkled his nose in disgust. Apparently he was a bit fed up with pub food.

"Hmm how about Indian?" Again with the crinkling. "Ok...so no. Oh! Let's do Spanish! I'm craving paella, hmm so good". She said dreamily, closing her eyes and thinking about the lovely Spanish rice, with rabbit, chicken, pork, vegetables...*Hmm just amazing...*

"Yes, I would love Spanish food". He said smiling softly, looking at her with a glint of amusement in his eyes.

She met his gaze and blushed, immediately looking away. Those were the moments that made her feel tingly and warm for him, those intense looks, that smile that seemed to be there only for her...

Oh god...

She didn't like him at all.

Getting herself together, she gave him a half-smile.

"C'mon, there's a tapas' place just around the corner". She said motioning with her head to move forward.

"Lead the way, oh wise one". He said, bowing down slightly in a mock reverence. El just laughed.

"Funny".

"Indeed, I am a hilarious chap". He teased, trying to sound British, though not really achieving it.

"Don't you dare to mock the brits Michael!" She answered, exaggerating her expression with a hand on her heart as if deeply outraged.

Mike just chuckled, El joining in happily.

"So, how's your dorm? Do you like it there?" He asked with a hint of curiosity.

"Yeah it's nice. I mean it's no five-star hotel, but overall is cool. How about you? Do you like your place?". She asked him, fidgeting with the strap of her bag just out of habit. She was actually enjoying their little walk to the restaurant, not really feeling nervous about them going to eat without the Party.

"Oh, I get you, yeah I feel the same. It's just a place to crash anyway...and well, you know... to bring the ladies". He said casually.

"Ah. Yes, very important I suppose". She said noncommittally.

Of course, he had to ruin what was starting to be a nice night with information I don't need or want about the girls he brings home.

"So, what about you? Bring lots of guys home?" The question surprised El, who was still mentally fuming about that unwanted tidbit of information.

What is it to him who I bring home?

"Not really. I'm not much for casual encounters. I usually prefer my sexual relationships to have a bit of meaning." Of course, El wasn't a saint, but after some stupid decisions when she was younger, these days she preferred to have a modicum of substance in her sex life.

"Wow, really? That's...well, that's boring". He said slowly, slightly puzzled by her answer.

Mike seemed to be processing that bit of knowledge thoroughly, as if he couldn't comprehend why would anyone on earth not enjoy casual sex.

El just shrugged uncaringly.

"Yes...well, not all of us can be like you Mike..." El countered just as she unexpectedly turned right and rushed through a nearby set of glass doors, conveniently entering the tapas place they were heading to.

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean? Eleven? Hey wait!" He said, his voice raising higher as she suddenly disappeared and left him outside.

Inside, El was already asking the Maitre D' for a table when Mike caught up with her. The Maitre D' looked at him expectantly.

"I'm with her". He said simply, while narrowing his eyes suspiciously at El for apparently not asking for a table for the both of them.

"Oh yeah, table for two please". She explained, smiling sweetly, as if she hadn't run away from her companion just seconds ago. Mike kept glaring at her, while the Maitre D' just looked amused.

"Follow me please". El didn't wait to be told twice and hurried up after the man. Mike huffed and followed after them.

Finally settled at their table, El was making small talk about the menu, talking excitedly about some of the dishes and deciding she definitely wanted the 'Paella Valenciana'.

"Do you want to share it Mike? It's for two people". He turned his eyes from the menu to her, looking at El oddly, as if contemplating whether she deserved to share the paella with him, given the stunt she just pulled.

El gave him her best puppy-dog eyes and when he sighed defeatedly, she knew she had him in her pocket.

"Fine". He said gruffly and El almost gave a delighted squeal. That is how excited she got about food.

After ordering the paella and their wine, Mike decided to press El into explaining what she had meant before.

"Eleven, will you tell me what you meant by what you said earlier? About not all of you being like me". The intensity of his gaze surprised her.

Well...fuck.

She was sort of hoping that he had forgotten about that.

El contemplated her answer carefully and decided to be honest.

"Mike you go through life without a care in the world. You meet girls, you sleep with them and move on. You tease everyone mercilessly. When you have a deadline, you wait until last minute and start the assignment. You are late almost every day, you...you're just...careless."

She paused, fearing that maybe she was going too far. Mike was looking at her stoically, not really showing if any of her words had any effect on him.

"If caring makes me boring, then I'm quite boring". She finished quietly.

"So, you think I don't care about anything or anyone, is that it?" He asked softly.

"Pretty much yeah". She finished lamely, flinching inwardly but trying to match what she was saying with an apologetic smile.

A brief silence stretched between them, though only for a few seconds because shortly after Mike spoke again.

"Wow, it's nice to know you think so highly of me..." He said with a nervous chuckle. El wanted to think it was mostly light-hearted, but she thought she perceived an air of dejection in his voice.

She suddenly felt terrible.

"Look, I'm sorry Mike, it wasn't my intention to..." Mike interrupted her.

"No worries, really. Oh, look here comes the food". And surely right at that moment, the waiter approached their table with the paella.

Nicely done El, now you've made it awkward.

Fortunately, she was mistaken. Mike kept on making jokes as they ate with gusto, enjoying themselves as if nothing had transpired. The evening went on smoothly and El had to admit she had a good time. There were no more awkward confessions or uncomfortable moments.

Everything seemed fine.

At the end of the night they said their goodbyes, El rushing to catch her bus –which was already there and about to leave– and Mike walking her to the bus stop before making his own way home. They both waved smilingly as she hopped on the bus and made her way upstairs the double-decker. As she sat down, she could see Mike's tall frame disappear slowly into the night.

Truth to be told, she was content. Not reading into their night as anything more than dinner among friends. El didn't want to hope for anything more. Realistically, she knew he was probably still hung up on Jennifer and in any case, annoying the hell out of someone doesn't exactly mean that they fancy that person.

Right?

I mean we're not middle schoolers for god's sake!

It was a long bus ride for El...

AN/: Thank you all for your kind reviews, follows and favorites :) So, what do you think? Does Mike like El? Or is it all in her head?

4. December

AN/: Thanks for reading :)

December

The last week of Uni before the winter break came quickly, which meant plenty of Christmas parties all around and people going home to see their families. Not El though. She had elected to stay home and finish her essays before January's deadline. With two 7500 words essays before January 11th she knew it would be too difficult to finish if she flew home.

Besides, London was supposed to be beautiful during the Christmas season and before her friends had to leave, they had some parties that required their presence. Dutifully. Almost mandatorily. School regulations and all.

One party was to be thrown by the school and the other one by their own specialism. Which meant that there would be free alcohol and that probably every single one of their classmates would be there.

The first party, held at the Bishop's Temple, wasn't a party *per se*, more like a reunion in a different pub and organized by none other than Jennifer Hayes, the class rep. El wasn't thrilled about the idea of being near Jennifer, but luckily, they weren't even close to being seated together. Everyone sat with their group of friends, pretty relaxed and having a good time.

The Party had their own table and were chatting animatedly. El was deeply into her own conversation with Max about which brand of cider was best (*Aspalls of course...*) while the guys were discussing a new theory they learned about the week before in Moira's class.

Suddenly El realized that Mike was looking at her with an odd look in his eyes, seemingly listening attentively to what she was saying to Max.

"What?" She asked half-annoyed, already preparing for one of his

teasing remarks.

"Nothing, it's just you're so passionate about things. The way you talk about the things you like, I mean". He said giving her a half-smile. It seemed like a good-natured comment, without his usual sarcasm or meanness.

I think I just melted...Oh god El, stop being so cheesy!

"Is that a good thing or bad thing?" She asked, without even knowing why. Probably because this was the second time he had mentioned her passionate nature and she was more than intrigued.

"Good". He said simply and they both smiled timidly. El blushing slightly.

"So Mike, fess up, what happened with Jennifer?" Dustin asked, interrupting the moment.

Who cares about Jennifer?

"Ough...don't remind me. I don't know what happened, I mean one minute we are ok and the next she's telling me we're better off".

Huh, apparently Mike cares...still...

"...and you know? She never told me why! That's what bothers me the most!" Mike was really into discussing the subject of his fall out with Jennifer. It seemed to El that it really had affected him or that at least his ego was still incredibly bruised. And she of course felt just a bit annoyed by that topic of conversation.

"I think I have to ask her, at least to get some closure. And you know what? I think I should do it right now, I mean she's standing right there!" He sounded pretty determined.

"What do you think Eleven?" El was still deep into her own thoughts when she heard Mike calling his stupid nickname for her. Only Mike ever called her Eleven.

"Sorry what?"

"The Jennifer thing, what do you think?" He said looking at her expectantly and a bit impatiently.

Why did he care what she thought?

It was almost closing time, so she decided it was as good time as any to go the loo. And in the process, to avoid Mike and his relentless resolve to talk about Jennifer.

"Excuse me guys I need to use the bathroom and it's almost closing time. We can talk when I get back". She said and without waiting for a response she left.

In the bathroom El tried to sort out her thoughts.

Ok El, you don't like him remember?

Ok you do but you're trying not to! Just listen and be polite if he keeps going with the Jennifer thing.

With a reassuring nod to her reflection in the mirror, she went back to their table.

Mike wasn't there. She didn't ask where he had gone and just drank from her glass, listening quietly to her friends, still thinking about her stupid infatuation with Mike...who just made his way back to the table.

"How did it go man?" Lucas asked.

"Hmm pretty ok I guess". He said gulping down what remained of his beer.

"Elaborate!" Max demanded, eager to know more.

"There's not much to say. She told me that she liked me but that she felt I wasn't really into her and that she preferred to leave it this way before it got complicated". He answered simply, shrugging his shoulders indifferently.

"But wait, what exactly did you do to give off that vibe? I mean, you've been practically obsessed with her since the beginning of the

school year?" Dustin asked, puzzled.

"I don't really know, but hmm...it's over and done with. Let's move on, there are plenty of fish in the sea. Who wants more beer? Last call is coming up". A chorus of 'me' followed and he got up to get the last round.

El didn't know what to think. Mike didn't appear to be particularly sad about what happened with Jennifer, but El did feel curious about what had really happened with them.

And for the hundredth time since their dinner at the Peruvian place, El chastised herself about her crush and her inability to forget her infatuation and move on. Never mind that her treacherous brain popped one last set of questions for her to overanalyze.

What happened to Mike's –apparently fervent– attraction for Jennifer? Why did it vanish so suddenly? Is he interested in someone else?

She was doomed.

Their second Christmas' party was held at one of the coolest buildings in London, 30 St Mary's Axe or as Londoners fondly called it: The Gherkin, because it did look like a giant pickle over the London skyline.

The party was ok. There was enough food and drinks to get tipsy, which everyone obviously did. It had the peculiarity of being in a cocktail bar, which meant everyone dressed up fancily. El was wearing a lovely burgundy cocktail dress with black heels. Max opted for a classic black dress and the guys were all in casual suits looking sharp.

There were other Christmas' parties around them, which provided for good entertainment. In the table next to theirs, there were about fifteen people who appeared to be co-workers having their office party. And they were having fun. So much fun in fact, that someone had to call 999 when one of the guys passed out and almost choked in his own vomit.

All of this before 10 in the evening.

When their gathering died down somewhere around midnight, the Party and some of their classmates went in search of another bar. After some walking around, they found a place with an underground atmosphere, quite dark and with an exclusive-like feel. They sat in a circle in a sofa and some armchairs, over a coffee table; with Max and El facing the other direction, almost out of the circle.

They were all tipsy, except for Max, who was terribly drunk. El was taking care of her, not letting her drink anymore and continuously providing her with glasses of water. She wasn't the worst drunk El had dealt with, Max actually understood that she was way too wasted to drink more and was just trying to shake it off and not vomit all over them.

"So, what's happening between the two of you?" Max asked, out of the blue.

"What?" El asked, eyes widening in shock and alarms going off in her head.

"You and Mike silly. I know you two have the hots for each other".

"I...you think he likes me?" El thought about lying to Max, but honestly, she was so tired of her one-sided conversations with herself, that she gave up without a fight. She needed someone to confide in what she was feeling.

And yes, she was interested in finding out why Max thought Mike might like her back.

"Oh El, what do you think that little dance you two have going on is about? It's pure foreplay".

"C'mon Max we are not twelve. Pulling my hair to get my attention should be out of the question. And yes, I agree, this thing we have it's like foreplay, but without the pleasurable outcome". She added frustrated.

"I think you expect too much from him. Mike is about the most child-like dude I've ever met. He's not going to confess his undying love for

you just like that".

"Wow, wow, who said anything about undying love?" El certainly wasn't in love.

Right?

"Figure of speech". Max said rolling her eyes. "The point is he's probably too afraid of saying something".

"Max this is Mike we're talking about, I've seen him chatting up anything with a skirt. He is certainly not shy with the opposite sex".

"But it's not the same thing. Picking up girls randomly in bars it's not the same as dealing with the real thing". She slurred, surprisingly making a lot sense, considering her level of drunkenness.

El kept processing what Max was saying, trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together.

Was it possible that Max was right?

"And also, think about it El, you guys are friends, he's not going to expose himself that easily, knowing that he could fuck this up. Maybe he needs time...or a nudge in the right direction". She finished meditatively.

El didn't know what to think. She wanted to believe in Max's theory, but...

"Hey Mike! Mike!" Max shouted, pulling at the sleeve of his shirt to get his attention.

"What?" He said turning to look at them from his seat. He was facing in the other direction, but fairly close to them, almost beside El.

"When are you and El going to get together?"

El did not see that one coming.

Max was apparently taking the matter into her own hands.

"You're perrrrrrfect for each other". She drunkenly slurred.

Shut up Max!

"Is that so?" He asked, in an overtly cocky tone, his gaze turning from Max to El.

He arched an eyebrow, a glint of amusement in his eyes; challenging her to answer. As if it were up to her to decide when would they finally admit their feelings for each other.

El was grateful for the dark atmosphere of the club because at that moment her face was hot under the intensity of his gaze.

The alcohol she had ingested made her boldly pinch his cheeks playfully while she answered.

"Oh no way dear Max, I'm not blonde enough...or you know, in possession of a gigantic butt as Mikey here usually likes".

Mike grinned softly and kept on staring at her for a bit more until one of the guys called him and he turned back to his previous conversation, deeming the matter was probably closed.

Embarrassed, she turned to look at Max who smiled triumphally.

"He definitely likes you. I know it". She said, right before the alcohol in her body decided it was time to make a comeback. "God I'm gonna barf!" She howled as she stood up and ran to the bathroom.

El dutifully followed her to give her moral support and hold her hair if necessary; absolutely not thinking about the way Mike had looked at her just minutes ago.

The rest of December passed without incident. Most of the Party went home, leaving El all alone. The dorm was almost empty, with just a handful of students remaining. Marina had stayed in London, but was busy playing host to her family, who had come to visit her; and Antoine had gone back to France for the break.

El missed her family, but if she was honest with herself, the heaviest

burden was to withstand the pitiful looks people gave her when they asked, and she told them she would be spending Christmas alone. For her it was just as any other day, she was a firm believer that if you loved someone, you showed them everyday and not only on a specific day, like Valentine's day or Christmas.

Her days over the break were spent working on her essays, going to the gym and visiting her favorite coffee shop in north London. She woke up early, ate a light breakfast and worked; pausing at noon to hit the circuits class. Then she returned, showered, had some lunch and went back to work. In the evenings she usually went out and had dinner, or sometimes she went to the theatre or to the cinema.

Her favorite part were the weekends. On those days she woke up late and went to have brunch at Saffron, the afore mentioned favorite coffee shop. Some days she stayed and worked there, other times she walked around Regent's Park for a couple of hours before going home.

On Christmas Eve she got some Italian take out and for the first time ever watched *It's a wonderful life*. On New Year's Eve she went to a party near Bankside and watched the fireworks with some of the remaining residents of her building. And New Year's Day she spent it *Netflixing and chillin'*.

Overall, El thought it had a been a pretty decent Christmas break. She felt rested and had managed to almost finish all her essays, needing only to proof read them before submitting them on January 11th.

And most importantly of all: she had used this time to convince herself that her crush on Mike had been some form of temporary insanity. She went over everything that had happened and came to the conclusion that her supposed infatuation was probably the result of her feeling subconsciously lonely (it had been a while since her last serious relationship) and because deep down she enjoyed his attention. But that was it.

With this newfound optimism, the start of the new year seemed even brighter than before for El.

AN/: Poor Ellie, she keeps trying to convince herself...

5. January

AN/: Thanks for reading and reviewing :)

Calpurnia011: El is indeed a terrible liar...

FangirlingStrangerThings: Gotta love Max...:)

January

The cold January air didn't stop El from going on a small holiday before classes started. With her essays finished, she decided to spend a couple of days in Wales. It was a bit rainy, but she was determined to make the best of her visit.

On her second day she was visiting Cardiff Bay when her phone buzzed a couple of times. She checked it out and saw a couple of texts on the Party's group, apparently the guys were freaking out about the upcoming deadline. Mike was, as usual, whining about it, while Dustin and Lucas were on the brink of having a panic attack. Max and Will were calmed, probably more interested in actually getting some work done, than to moan about it to their cellphones.

El felt sympathetic about their predicament and answered Dustin's question about whether the essays had to be written using a specific font and size, pointing out that the format guidelines had been posted a while ago on the specialism board. Not a minute later, Mike was the first to reply.

-Mike Wheeler:

Yes well, people that are already finished with their assignments and are off gallivanting around the U.K aren't allowed to comment.

She couldn't help but laugh at his comment. No doubt he had seen the picture she had posted that morning walking around Mermaid Quay. Cheekily, she replied:

Careful darling, your green is showing...

The fact that all her friends were still finishing their essays and that she was off 'gallivanting' around Wales wasn't really her fault. She worked her ass off through Christmas, missing Hopper and her home, but it was worth it if it meant doing a good job in her master's.

-Mike Wheeler:

What's that supposed to mean?!

El preferred not to answer him and Max stepped in for her.

-Maxi:

C'mon Wheeler, green with envy because she's having a good time and we are all practically chained to our desks, slaving away at the library.

-Mike Wheeler:

Oh, fuck off Max.

El just laughed to herself and put her phone away into her bag, deciding it was time to get back to her touristy mode and visit Cardiff Castle. Still, this interaction with her friends made her miss them a bit more and she was glad she was seeing them again next week.

Monday finally came. El was very excited to see her friends again, even Mike, because she felt confident enough that her silly crush was gone for good. She arrived at the building a good half an hour before her class started and decided to go to the common room to wait. Some of her classmates were already there so at least she had someone to chat with while she waited.

A couple of minutes later, she saw Mike enter the common room. Her heart did a summersault and he smiled at her as he saw her but kept going towards the bathroom. El waved at him and began to panic.

What was that?! Oh god...he looks so good...

She hid her face in her hands for a moment, in frustration. Her companions seemed oblivious to her tribulations and El tried to

conceal her distress. And suddenly he was back, standing beside her, looking at her expectantly.

"Hi!" He said smiling, still looking as if he was waiting for something to happen.

She managed to mutter a weak "Hey", without being able to meet his gaze.

What the hell is wrong with you?!

"Aren't you going to greet me properly?"

So that was it...

Visibly frustrated, she cracked under the pressure of his scrutiny.

"I just waved at you!" She said defensively, feeling awkward and a bit shaken by his request.

"Oh, c'mon Eleven we haven't seen each other since before Christmas, I deserve at least a hug!" He said happily, not seemingly upset by her sullen disposition.

Oh god.

Cheeks red with embarrassment, she complied.

"Hi Mike". She said as she hugged him and kissed his cheek, following the European fashion.

And as politely as she could muster she added, "I hope you had a nice time at home".

It's not that she was bothered by the physical contact, she kissed and hugged her friends basically every time they said goodbye to go home. It was the physical contact with Mike that made her nervous. Besides he didn't deserve a hug! He had been relentless on his teasing lately, even if it was via text messages on their group chat.

He seemed satisfied with her reluctant greeting and sat in one of the chairs near her, greeting the other students and chatting amicably

with them. Mentally sulking and trying hard to hide it, El joined in and continued to make small talk with Mike and their classmates.

For the most part she kept quiet while listening to the others talk about their holidays, with Mike boasting happily about his time back home with his family. Suddenly Will came in through the common room's door and El leaped off her feet excitedly, running to him and almost tackling him to the ground with the force of her hug.

"Willy baby!"

"Ellie!"

"God, I missed you so much!" She said emotionally, still hugging him tightly. Of all her friends, Will was the one she probably missed the most.

"Me too!" He said, setting her back on her feet to look at her properly. "Have you grown in the last month?"

She chuckled and swatted his arm playfully.

"What do you think?" She asked in turn, smiling at his crazy conjecture.

Meanwhile, Mike followed the whole exchange closely, glaring at the pair. Will saw him and went over to shake his hand, El right beside him.

"Hey Mike!"

"Hey Will". He said taking the proffered hand and shaking it weakly, the intensity of his gaze now solely resting on El. He hadn't even let go of Will's hand, when he exploded.

"Really Eleven? You barely acknowledge me, and he gets that obscene amount of hugging? Jeez..."

Taken aback by his sudden outburst she just asked him, "What's your problem Michael?"

His scowl deepened at her question and he opened his mouth, on the

verge of responding but seemed to think it better and closed it before dismissively getting up and pushing past them towards the door.

"Whatever". He muttered and kept walking off to class, leaving El puzzled by his sudden change in demeanor. One minute he was talking excitedly about his trip, then the next he was sulking and berating her out of the blue.

If El was confused, Will was certainly baffled by his behavior.

"What's his deal?"

"Who knows? It's Mike, there's always something wrong with him". She said shrugging.

And they both burst out giggling.

"C'mon let's get to class before we're late". Will put his arm around her and they climbed the stairs to the second floor where the classroom for the day was located.

Max, Lucas and Dustin were already there, seated in the back row as usual. Mike was there too but seemed uninterested in the conversation, deeply invested in the contents of his cell phone instead. He looked up when they arrived, but quickly averted his gaze when he saw it was them.

El decided to pay him no mind, hugging her friends lightly, albeit without the enthusiasm with which she had greeted Will, but incredibly happy that they were all back together.

El kept her distance from Mike throughout the whole week, and on Friday it became evident that something was wrong between them.

Max dragged her to a party in Soho and El reluctantly agreed to go. She knew Mike would be there and that made her stomach churn. She didn't feel like seeing him, or talking to him for that matter. The week had passed practically uneventful, though she had noticed that the more distance she put between them, the worse he got with his stupid comments towards her.

Their last argument had been about *Eggos*, freaking *Eggos*! She had been talking about how they were one of her favorite breakfasts, with maple syrup, cheese cream and walnuts; to have Mike not only argue that *Eggos* sucked, but that her way of eating them was just plain weird and disgusting. El resented that. Nobody messed with her *Eggos*. In the end she just flipped him off and went for a cup of coffee to cool off.

That had been on Wednesday. On Friday night when they got to the club, she avoided him as best as she could. And when the inevitable happened and they ran into each other along with Max, he seemed to pick up on her distance right away.

"How's it going?" He asked her, with a tone that implied forced politeness.

"Cool. You?" She said coldly, not making an effort at all.

"Fine".

Awkward much?

And they didn't say anything else to each other, letting Max to do the talking. This, until she gratefully pulled El towards the dancefloor. After that encounter she didn't bump into him again.

She left the party around 1 am, feeling oddly empty and forlorn.

On Saturday, Mike texted her.

-Mike Wheeler:

Would you be so kind as to tell me what's gotten you so annoyed with me?

To say she was surprised by his message would be an understatement. She was quietly sipping her coffee, waiting for her brunch when her phone buzzed. Stunned by his question (she really didn't think he cared enough), she decided to do the most sensible thing and lie about it.

I'm always annoyed Mike.

-Mike Wheeler:

Yes, I know you have a lovely disposition on daily basis, but you're way more annoyed than usual.

She considered her answer and feeling bitter about the whole ordeal she typed:

I'm just tired of being the clown of the group, ok?

-Mike Wheeler:

You're not.

I am the center of all your stupid jokes Mike. It can get tedious after a while. And what about your macho act with me and Will? What was that all about?

-Mike Wheeler:

I'm sorry, I promise I won't treat you like that anymore.

Thanks.

-Mike Wheeler:

So, we're cool?

Cool as a cucumber.

-Mike Wheeler:

Lol :)

:D

El sincerely hoped that this would get him off her back and she felt relieved. Besides, despite everything, she didn't want to be mad at him.

Things were back to normal the following Monday. Mike was nice to her the whole morning, looking a bit remorseful and El couldn't help but feel a little guilty about her attitude the previous week. He seemed to be making an effort and El, taking pity on him, tried to be nice in return.

By the end of the week however, they were back to their bantering and teasing.

In quiet resignation, El decided one more time to pay him no mind and give back as good as she got.

That Friday they ended up having lunch with Max and Lucas in a nearby cafeteria. They were having a silly conversation about their childhoods and their activities in the summer.

"Yeah in my hometown, we usually go to the lake and..." El was saying, before being interrupted by Mike.

"Hawkins, Indiana you mean?" He said smugly.

El felt surprised that he knew about her hometown, it was something that they hadn't really discussed. She turned to him and poked his shoulder accusingly.

"What? How do you know where I'm from? Wait...have you been stalking me on Facebook Mike?" She asked him, narrowing her eyes suspiciously.

"Oh yes El, I just loooooovveeee stalking you. It's my favorite activity of the day, I just want to know everyyyyyything there is to know about you!" He said mockingly, causing them to burst out laughing at his obvious sarcasm.

"It's not as if I have a massive crush on you or something..." He added after their giggles subsided; looking at her while he fidgeted with a sugar pack that laid forgotten in the table.

Her heart stopped for a second at his sardonic admission. She knew he was joking but why, oh why, would he say THAT specifically?

She just kept her cool and teasingly retaliated.

"Ha! There you go, you are the one admitting it, not me!" In front of them Max and Lucas just stared at them, silently amused.

Mike playfully nudged her shoulder with his in protest, El nudged back and they both burst out laughing. El going along with the whole interaction, trying to hide her blush.

"So, I'm heading to your part of town, what time are you leaving Eleven?"

"Uhhhhmmm...why?" She said, again narrowing her eyes suspiciously.

"Because I'm going with you of course!" He said beaming like a clown.

"Uh...no you're not". She said flatly.

"Uh...yes I am". He said imitating her tone.

"Ughhh...why?" She asked, pretending to be frustrated.

"I need to go the Financial Office".

"And? How is that any of my business?"

"Ohh c'mon, let me come with you!" He said mock pleading, pulling on her sleeve like a kid desperately asking for chocolate.

El knew she couldn't resist his puppy dog eyes. Truth to be told she was just messing with him, she was heading home after all, and her dorm was near the main university campus where the Financial Office was located.

"Fine!"

"Yes!" He said triumphally. "Can we go to the bank first?"

"Oh god, you're so annoying. Fine! But we take the bus home!" She knew he preferred the tube, but out of annoyance she decided that she wanted to use the bus.

"Yes Eleven, whatever you want". He told her sweetly, giving her a

silly smile.

He's so infuriating.

And so, they said good bye to Max and Lucas and made their way to the bank. El waited patiently while Mike withdrew money from the ATM and soon they started walking to the bus stop.

While walking, El would glance at Mike from time to time, he was saying something about a party he would be going to the next day with some of the other masters' students. They finally got to the bus stop and soon the red double-decker arrived, they climbed to the top and El took the window seat while Mike opted to sit in the opposite row of seats, away from El.

As soon as he sat, Mike started browsing through his phone. El looked at him expectantly and realized that he wouldn't be talking to her anytime soon. She felt a bit awkward, not knowing if by making conversation she was interrupting him from something important. For all she knew he could be answering a significant email.

Just the same, El thought he was being a bit rude by phubbing. She couldn't really understand him. Why ride the bus with her if he preferred the company of his phone? He made such a fuss about her coming with him.

This guy, ughhh! Infuriating falls short to describe him!

If Mike thought El would go with him to finance office, he was sorely mistaken. She wasn't going to lose valuable time following him like a puppy just because she may or may not like him. Especially with that attitude.

"So, this is my stop. Next one will drop you near the finance office. See you!". She explained as she pressed the button to request the stop.

"Oh! Ok". He had strange look on his face, as if the ride had been too short.

Is that disappointment I see on his face? As if!

"Thanks for coming Eleven".

"No big, I live just around this block, so it was on my route anyway". She said, not really paying attention to him. Her mind was focusing on how wasted this opportunity had been. They could have enjoyed this time alone, away from their friends, maybe talk a bit more and patch things up.

She waved goodbye and made her way downstairs towards the exit.

As she walked home, she contemplated her situation. El was, once again, frustrated and it was getting the better of her sanity. Mike was hot and cold. One moment he wanted her with him and the next he was ignoring her with his phone. Sometimes they had flirty moments and she thought she could read him, but no. Nothing at all. She didn't have the slightest idea of what went on inside his head where she was concerned, and it was driving her crazy. It was safe to say that she was still a bit skeptical about her conversation with Max last month.

In matters of the heart, El thought that you either liked or didn't like someone. Period. Black or white. She couldn't deal with all these shades of grey Mike was throwing her way, if whatever weird, cynic rapport they had, could even be classified as such.

I have to stop fooling myself: he doesn't like me and I'm not over this stupid crush, she thought dejectedly.

Maybe I just need to accept that I like him and then ignore it. Learn to live with it, knowing that this will never be.

When she got home, she decided to end her pity party by hitting the gym. The weekend was looming in the horizon and she planned to spend a couple of Mike-free days. At least 'real Mike' free days, for she knew, deep down, that she wouldn't be able to keep him out of her head.

AN/: Back to square one for El? She keeps going around in circles though...

6. February

February

February marked the month of Will's birthday. Even though he wasn't much into celebrating any of his birthdays, the Party managed to drag him for drinks at The Crown, a pub near King's Cross Station where they had gone some other times to watch football matches.

For some unexplainable reason El found herself again seated in front of Mike in the table they were sharing with their friends. Due to destiny, a mere coincidence or whatever twist of fate you wish to call it; they always ended it up close to each other. To El's chagrin.

Though she was trying not to dwell on it too much, focusing on her drink and the conversation going around the table. At some point the topic changed to high school sweethearts and they went about recounting their past relationships, moving on to college and up until today.

She knew Max and Lucas had a thing going on but were very discreet about it. Not because it was a secret relationship or something, but because they both wanted to enjoy the freedom and anonymity London procured without labeling anything. Dustin had been enjoying the single life but had recently started dating a girl from his building and was quite excited about her. Will was content being single, he had just gotten out of a long-term relationship before coming to London, so he was very happy by himself at moment. And of course, Mike was perfectly fine dating regularly, stating cockily that monogamy was overrated.

Just one more time El asked herself what she saw in him...

And obviously, El and her choice in boyfriends or the current lack of one, was clearly a popular topic. As she told them a bit about her past boyfriends, she was rudely interrupted by Mike, because of course, he had to have an opinion on the matter.

"You probably like your guys to look like GQ models, don't deny it Eleven. That's why you don't have a boyfriend, you are too

demanding".

Ah. The irony. If you only knew whom I like, you dimwit.

"Ugh, here we go again". She said rolling her eyes. "You don't know what I like Mike, don't presume even for a minute that you know anything about me". She responded, quite pissed.

They were interrupted before he could retort. Unbeknownst to them, this guy at the bar had been ogling El for a while now and he chose that precise moment to approach her, disturbing their little spat.

"Excuse me, are you two together?" He asked signaling between the two. He was an older guy, maybe forty, with a large build, very tall and a scruffy beard. *Like a bear*, she thought. The stranger reminded El of her dad.

"You look good together". He continued. El couldn't make out if it was just drunken ramblings or if he was serious about his remark.

Surprised, Mike looked up to the man and quickly replied, almost outraged:

"What?! No, no, no way. Be my guest, she's all yours mate".

El shot him a dirty look and turned back to the man. British Hopper saw their interaction and quickly realized that he wouldn't be buying the lovely doe-eyed brunette a drink tonight.

"Hmm sorry, I'm not interested". She apologized awkwardly.

"No worries, luv". He smiled gently, winked at her and returned to his friends.

El felt irritated. How was it that even some random guy she met five seconds ago seemed to perceive some sort of sexual tension between them while Mike remained oblivious?

And she felt hurt. Hurt by Mike and his collusion with the stranger. He was supposed to be her friend, to help her in situations of unwanted attention. Not to hand her over to the first random stranger that makes a move on her!

Worst of all, he didn't seem to care one bit about the whole thing. While she had been politely turning down the man, Mike had been looking at his stupid phone, blatantly ignoring them.

She decided she had had enough.

This ends now. She thought determinedly. *I can't keep pining away for Mike Wheeler.*

"Sorry guys, I have to go early tonight. See you tomorrow". Without giving them time to stop her, she picked up her bag and started to make her way to the door.

The others had been talking animatedly, hardly noticing what had happened, so they were surprised at El's announcement and hasty departure.

"What? Oh, c'mon El! It's barely nine!" Max exclaimed.

"Sorry Max!" She shouted as she reached the exit. With a hurried wave at them she left the pub.

All eyes turned immediately to Mike.

"What did you do Mike?" Will asked.

"What? Why do you assume it was something I did?!" He asked, clearly irritated.

"It's always you Wheeler". Max scolded him.

"You basically sold her out to that guy, didn't you?" Will asked accusingly. He had seen the man talking to them and put two and two together.

"How was I to know she wouldn't be interested?" He cried out, shrugging casually.

Will gave him a pitiful look and shook his head disappointedly.

"You are as thick as a brick wall Mike". He added resignedly, suddenly getting up from his chair. "Catch up with you later, kids".

And with that he grabbed his backpack and ran after El.

"What's his problem?" Mike asked them not really understanding what the hell had happened. The others just shook their heads and resumed their conversation leaving Mike to his phone. They weren't about to get involved between these two. No way.

Mike just sighed exasperatingly, eyes still fixed on the pub's exit.

Meanwhile, Will was just in time to catch El down the street near the pub. She was walking fast, heading for her bus stop.

"El wait up!" He shouted.

Surprised, she turned around and was relieved to find Will running towards her.

"What happened? It is way too early to head home". He asked, while trying to catch his breath.

"Nothing really, I just need to go home and catch up with my reading". She said doing her best to sound convincing.

"Bullshit El". He said rolling his eyes. "I know you're not behind on your reading, besides we have all the weekend to do school work".

She sighed miserably and gave up. Somehow Will could always see through her.

"I'm tired Will. Sometimes I just can't stand to be near Mike". She said, clearly drained.

"What exactly happened?" She sighed and gave him a quick version of the incident.

"...like a piece of meat, throwing me to the lions". She finished angrily.

Will contemplated what she had just told him. Up until that moment, he had had his suspicions about these two, the tension was evident, after all...but El's story was the official confirmation that something

was indeed going on, at least on her end.

He instantly felt bad for his friend.

"Oh Ellie...you fell for the boy who pulled at your pigtails in kinder garden".

She sighed dejectedly and shook her head in stubborn denial. But didn't bother to refute his statement verbally.

Were all her friends aware of her stupid crush?

"Maybe. I don't know...ok, yes I like him". She finally admitted.

"But I don't know what his deal is. I just wish he would make up his mind about me. One minute he's flirty and acting all jealous, and the next he's handing me out to the first guy that asks!".

"I don't think it's personal El".

"What?"

"Mike. From what I've gathered he just wanted to have a good time in London, no strings attached. We are only here for a year, so why complicate everything by falling in love?"

"But...but, what about true love? Isn't that way of thinking closing the door on something potentially awesome? I mean, people studying abroad fall in love all the time, people get married and move to other continents for god's sake!" Her irritation was palpable at this point.

"And I'm not saying this because of me, he could fall in love with anyone else and turn it down because we'll be gone in less than a year?!" She couldn't help but feel sad for him. For about thirty seconds at least...

"I know El, I get your point. I think he's just afraid of open himself up to something real". He said prudently.

"Then I don't see the need to drag me into his mind games. I'm telling you Will, I'm a little desperate. I can't seem to stop thinking about him even though I know it's hopeless and I hate it".

"I don't think he can help himself, I truly believe he likes you as much as you like him. But deep down, he can't come to terms with it. I don't even think he has fully realized the depth of his feelings for you". He explained thoughtfully.

"Uhhhhhh! And guys say we are the complicated ones!" She complained crossly.

"We are actually quite simple El: Mike likes to have your attention. All men enjoy that. He gets a kick out your bantering and bickering, while still remaining in his comfort zone". Will sounded as if this was common knowledge, a matter of fact. Well, nobody told her this. Ever.

She sighed. "I just wish he would give us a chance...if, your theory is correct. I want to believe it Will but it's too hard for me to understand why someone wouldn't take a chance at happiness when it's right in front of them".

"But El...you haven't told him how you feel. You two dance around each other but neither is willing to take the risk. For all you know, he might be wondering the same thing about you". He remarked sensibly.

She shook her head vigorously.

"What if I tell him and make a fool of myself? What if we can't get pass this? Even if he is a pain in the ass most of the time, he's my pain in the ass. I don't want to lose him Will".

Will nodded understandingly.

"If he would just...say something..." El trailed off sadly.

Will just looked at her silently for a moment and then 'Will the Wise' emerged.

"Sometimes people choose not to see what's in front of them. Sometimes they really don't see it. And sometimes they don't think they deserve what's in front of them". He paused for a bit, looking ahead, apparently lost in his own thoughts, before continuing.

"All these possibilities require the person to realize it on their own, to accept what they feel and decide whether to act on it or not. And, if...in the end it doesn't happen, then I guess it just wasn't meant to be".

El stared at him in awe.

"How did you get so wise Will?

He gave her a shy smile and hugged her to him comfortingly.

"Just give it time El. I know it's hard but maybe it will help you too? I mean...to move on?"

She nodded solemnly and hugged him harder.

AN/: I just love Will the Wise...Thanks for reading :)

7. March

AN/: Thank you for sticking with the story. I know we are all on the 'I hate Mike Club' (stubborn overgrown baby!) and sadly, we are going to be there for a while. But he'll see the light eventually. I promise.

And lastly, I decided to post two more chapters today because I'm aware we are all frustrated. Thanks again for the reviews :)

March

March was pretty much the same as February. El went out, went to classes, studied, exercised and focused on finishing her essays due in April. She was still struggling with her feelings for Mike, though not as much as before. Or so she thought anyway.

Part of her believed her improvement came from the many things she had to do, between university and her friends, she had little time to dwell on him. Moreover, the time they had to submit these essays was less than for the first ones back in January. That meant they were a bit more stressed out and usually pretty busy.

All things considered, it was borderline ridiculous how El always found the time to do everything. Tonight for instance, she decided she was going to a party in her building. Marina wasn't in London for the weekend, but she decided to go stag and be social about it.

She made her way to the common room where the party was held, there were people already there drinking and chatting excitedly. Some of them she knew and some of them she had only seen once or twice. At the main table there were all sorts of alcohol and several kinds of snacks, she poured herself some wine and begun talking with Jess, one of the girls that worked at the reception of her accommodation building.

An hour or so later, El was on her third glass of wine, not really paying attention to how quickly she was drinking; when she saw Antoine enter the room. He didn't see her at first, more worried about

getting something to drink than about looking at who was at the party. When he spotted her though, he came closer to say hi.

"Hey El, it's been a while". He said smiling.

They hadn't seen each other since December, not since they had run into each other at one of the university's parties.

"Hi Antoine! Yes, it has been a while. How have you been?" She asked politely.

"Pretty good, been working hard on those essays. You?"

"Quite well".

"Want to sit for a bit?" He said motioning to an unoccupied couch.

"Sure". She agreed, while pouring more wine into her cup.

They sat and begun talking about trivial stuff, trivial until he decided to ask about her romantic entanglements.

"So, what's up with you? Are you seeing anybody?" He asked casually.

She groaned in mock drama. "Oh god, don't ask about my love life. It's virtually non-existent and way too complicated".

El was tipsy and she knew it.

Why am I telling him this?

He chuckled sympathetically.

"C'mon it can't be worse than mine, I broke up with my fiancé".

Now this is interesting information.

"What?! Oh, I'm so sorry Antoine". She said, trying to sound sincere.

"No worries, I'm doing better these days".

She nodded and looked down at her cup contemplatively.

To this day, El doesn't know what made her tell Antoine all about her crush on Mike, but she did. Only later did she realize that her little drunken rant might have ruined any chance she could have had with Antoine. And though she wasn't that into him, El knew Antoine could help her to move on. Or at the very least be a nice distraction from Mike.

Maybe she told him because she knew Antoine was one of Mike's friends outside of the Party. Hoping that, somehow, he had an insight about what Mike thought of her. They weren't best buds or anything, but she knew they sometimes hung out together, along with other guys from university. Apparently, Mike was quite popular amongst other circles. Go figure...

"I...kind of have this huge crush on one of my friends". She said wincing slightly. Antoine only looked at her, waiting for her to elaborate.

"It's hopeless, you know? He doesn't see me like that". She sounded defeated, pathetically drunk.

"Are you talking about Mike?"

"What...how...how did you know?" El almost had a heart attack. Was it that obvious? "Is it that obvious?" She repeated, now to him.

"Not really, but he is good looking, I know women like him. I just put two and two together because you guys hang out all the time". He told her gently, as if trying to stop her from hyperventilating.

"Oh".

"Why do you think it's hopeless?"

"Because he's happy just randomly hooking up with a bunch of women..."

Women who are not me, clearly...

"...if he was interested, he would have made a move by now, or maybe I'm not his type. I don't know...". She trailed off dejectedly, realizing that she was saying way too much.

Stop drinking El! No, better yet, stop talking!

"Hmm..." He muttered, thinking carefully what he was going to say. "I've seen him chatting up women and I don't think it's as bad as you think. He's always very polite and he doesn't hook up that easily, he is selective. Plus, he is one of the nicest guys I know".

"Oh..."

*So maybe he is not a total man whore...*she thought. "Nicest? Really? He is usually annoying the hell out of me".

He laughed lightly at her pouting face.

"It's really hard to know how much he dates, he is very private".

"Are you sure this is the same Mike we are talking about?"

He smiled softly.

"I'm sure".

"Huh...interesting". Yeah, she was drunk now.

"Well El, it's been a pleasure. Gotta get back to my writing. See you around, hopefully more often". He told her kindly.

She smiled at him and nodded. And right before he went through the door she turned to her and said:

"Oh and...good luck with Mike".

"Thanks, your faith in me is greatly appreciated". She said sarcastically. He chuckled and exited the room.

El decided to do the same and go upstairs to sleep off her drunken stupor, trying to ignore the pounding in her head and any hopeful thoughts about Mike ever returning her feelings.

AN/: Sorry about the lack of Mileven. This chapter was supposed to give El an insight on how Mike thinks, specifically that he's not a

total asshole to women. Also, her interaction with Antoine is important for future chapters :)

8. April

April

Finally, the day of the submission deadline came...and as usual, there was a party on campus to celebrate the end of essay submissions. After all the hard work, it was time to have a good time.

By 8:30 pm of that Tuesday, Mike was already a bit drunk. He had been drinking with some friends from his building, of course wishing farewell to their essays but he still had the energy to get to the campus' party. As soon as he arrived, he spotted the Party near the bar and headed straight to them.

He saw El, with her back to him and in a drunken haze he approached her from behind, using his right arm to pull her to him tenderly in a semi hug and giving her a kiss on the cheek. El froze momentarily and then melted into his chest, enjoying the feeling.

She had seen him enter the bar, but she surely hadn't expected that greeting. She and Mike seldomly touched each other, so the contact felt strange, yet oddly right as well. As if they fitted together perfectly. It was intense.

He released her and greeted the others, while chatting happily about being free of essays and their plans for the remaining of the week. They were standing over a high table near the dancefloor. El was nursing a vodka cranberry, while Max and Lucas were sipping their beers. Dustin and Will, who had recently arrived at the party, were at the bar procuring themselves something to drink.

She didn't know when or why but the conversation suddenly turned to the weather and El commented on how the cold (yes, even in April) was making her lips perpetually dry. Max chose that moment to get sassy and El almost hated her. Almost.

"Hear that Mike? El's lips are chapped. You should help her with that!" Max said, huge grin plastered on her face, eyes suggestively going back and forth between them. El blushed and focused on her drink, trying to ignore the jab.

"What? Oh, shut up Max". Mike said, suddenly irritated at being the butt of her jokes.

The redhead just laughed, took Lucas' hand and dragged him to the dancefloor, leaving Mike and El alone. They looked at each other awkwardly for a moment before taking a sip of their drinks and turning their eyes to the dancefloor.

"So, where you at Jennifer's place? I heard she had invited a bunch of people for drinks". She asked curiously. El and the rest of the Party hadn't been invited join in. She got the feeling that Jennifer didn't like them very much. Right back at you, Hayes.

"Yeah, I was. Antoine and a bunch of law masters were there too.". He commented noncommittally.

"Will and I were wondering about that, you know because of your... thing with her". She said conversationally, without really meaning anything by it.

"You know, you should fuck Will." He said out of the blue. He seemed angry all of a sudden.

She almost choked on her drink at his words.

"What?! What are you talking about?" Her tone alarmed, eyes wide with surprise.

"He's practically your boyfriend. I'm just saying". He explained tensely but shrugging it off as if it wasn't a big deal.

Now El got mad.

"Don't be an idiot Mike. I don't like him like that, we're just friends".

I like you, you thick headed, moron!

"Oh, but you're so close. Always together, always whispering to each other, talking about us..." He said, his tone disdainful.

She stared him incredulously, listening carefully but feeling resentment at his implication.

"You know, this thing we both have going on..." He said gesturing at the two. "It's just between you and me; it's a very healthy bond. I don't really like him calling me names or mocking me behind my back. That's fine when it's you because that's our thing, but..." He trailed off when El interrupted him.

"What are you worried about? It's all just a bit of fun. Neither of us takes it seriously. I just vent with him when you get too obnoxious, which is basically all the time". She said smiling sweetly, trying to end the argument quickly. She wasn't in the mood for one of his petty outbursts.

"It just...this is our thing..." He said uncertainly, somewhat less irritated and more resigned.

"You started this Mike –publicly, mind you– and now you don't want the others to tease you about it?" She asked him disbelievingly.

The nerve of him!

She considered his words for a moment. He wasn't really mad at Will. In fact, she thought he was too drunk for this conversation, but he did seem annoyed that she went to Will whenever she was feeling frustrated about 'their thing' or lack thereof for that matter.

Their conversation was interrupted by the return of their friends. And she decided to go for another drink, Mike would have to suck it up.

She went to first and then in search of another vodka cranberry. When she came back, Mike wasn't with the group. She shrugged it off but rapidly, she spotted him. He was dancing with a blonde she hadn't seen before at any of the university parties. They were dancing closely, almost too close for her taste.

And then he kissed her and El felt her heart break into a million pieces.

It's not as if she didn't know he dated frequently, but one thing is to know and another entirely different is to see it for yourself.

Out of sight, out of mind.

She put on a strong front and kept on dancing with Max, but she knew her redheaded friend probably saw the whole thing as well.

And as if this wasn't enough, out of the corner of her eye, El saw the blonde whisper something in his ear, to which he responded with a passionate kiss. They soon broke apart and hurriedly went to get their coats and left the party.

Max gave her a compassionate look, but El just shrugged.

"I'm fine Max".

She wasn't.

"Maybe you should talk to him El? Tell him the truth?"

Why?

"What would be the point Max? It's pretty evident he doesn't feel the same".

Max looked at her sadly.

"Oh Ellie..."

El shook her head vigorously, trying to dissipate the pity she saw on Max's face.

"Don't worry. Deep down, I've known it the whole time. But maybe you're right. At least if I tell him he will back off and maybe I'll be able to move on once and for all. I mean how can you get over your crush if he's constantly being a pain in your ass?" She added as an afterthought.

It was time to get rid of said pain in the ass, even if she was fond of it.

"I agree, at best you'll get some sort of closure".

Soon after, they went home.

The next morning, El was determined to put an end to this. She decided –again–to try and dissuade him from teasing her so much, from flirting with her constantly. She wasn't really prepared to confess her crush on him and certainly not via texts, but at least she would try to get him off her back.

She grabbed her phone and sat down on her bed.

Mike?

His response came almost immediately.

-Mike Wheeler:

Yes Eleven?

Wow are you stalking me? Lol

-Mike Wheeler:

I just saw you typing.

Oh. Anyway, hmmm...do you think we can meet today? I need to talk to you about something.

-Mike Wheeler:

Umm...ok...any hints on what this is about?

Don't worry it's nothing serious. Can we do coffee at 3pm? The Coffee Mug?

Liar.

-Mike Wheeler:

Ok, cool. See you then.

Thanks :D

At 3pm El was seated in one of the tables, sipping a flat white when she saw Mike come in. She waved at him and he approached the table, seating quickly.

"Hi".

"Hello Eleven". He seemed tense and expectant. Probably hung over too from yesterday's party.

"Want some coffee?" She offered, half stalling.

"Nah, I'm good, so what's up?"

No time like the present I guess.

"Ok, so I probably should have said this yesterday but was too much of a coward about it. That healthy relationship that you think we have? Well, it's not". He just listened to her and for once didn't interrupt her.

"Sometimes you can be a bit hurtful and it gets too irritating to be always the target of your teasing".

"I'm sorry, I didn't know it bothered you that much. I thought we were on the same page". He told her, sounding sincerely contrite.

"I've told you before, it's not terrible. Most of the time it makes me laugh, but sometimes it can get pretty...confusing". She said, a bit uncertainly. She knew she was a coward by not telling him the truth, but she didn't want to expose herself. One thing was to think about it in your head and another very different to have the object of your affections right in front of you.

Mike looked slightly apologetic and nodded.

"Ok. I'll stop". He said simply.

"Thank you". Silence fell over them and El awkwardly drank what remained from her coffee.

Mike seemed lost in thought. And just when she was about to make small talk, he beat her to it.

"I have a question though: what did you mean by 'confusing'?"

Oh god, leave it to him to ask about that...

"Eleven?"

"Sorry, I spaced out for a moment".

"Spacing out is good". He said lamely, one of his goofy smiles on his face.

She smiled too. He was such a dork sometimes.

El took a deep breath, there was no going back now.

"Ok so, you know you're like the hottest guy in our group, right? Every girl likes you and wants you...well...I'm very sad to say that I'm not the exception to the rule".

She tried to gauge his reaction but opted to look down instead, terrified at the thought of finding something she wouldn't like on his face. At his silence, she continued.

"What I'm trying to say –and let me be very clear about this so there's not any misunderstanding– is that I like you. A lot".

There. The cat was finally out of the bag.

Bravely, she looked up. He was looking at her intently, but she couldn't decipher his expression.

And then he spoke.

"El...I don't know what to say..." His voice was soft, hesitant.

And for the first time ever, he called her El and not Eleven...

But he doesn't know what to say...Oh.

'Oh' indeed.

El figured that he didn't know what to make of her confession, either that, or he was faking his hesitation to avoid rejecting her outwardly. She decided to save herself from more humiliation.

"You don't have to say anything. I just need you to help me by giving me a break. Your seemingly exclusive obsession with me is confusing

and I can't get pass this if a I have you breathing down my neck". She tried to say jokingly. But he didn't laugh so she continued.

"The fact that I'm telling you was just my last desperate attempt to stop feeling like this". She joked lamely.

He nodded and smiled sadly. "Ok El, but I mean you don't feel...that bad...right?" He added, sounding somewhat worried.

"Hahaha no I'm just being overly dramatic". She told him, trying sound reassuring.

"Cool". He replied simply. After a moment of more awkward silence, he seemed to be struck by a thought and spoke again.

"El? I don't want things to get weird between us. Promise me?"

She nodded, solemnly. "I promise Mike". He looked satisfied with her answer and nodded as well.

El, on the other hand, needed to get out of there fast. She checked her phone and came up with a lie.

"Oh! I have to go! I promised Max to meet her to do some shopping".

"Oh, ok".

"Thanks Mike. See you around". And she practically ran for the door.

As she walked home, El felt numb. She didn't feel the weight of her secret oppressing her chest anymore. She felt...almost free...for about three minutes at least.

The full repercussions of what she had done hit her like a ton of bricks. She had finally told him, and he didn't feel the same. There was no uncertainty anymore, no more doubts; everything was clear. Deep down she had hoped that maybe if she told him about how she felt, the floodgates would open up and he would confess that he too had been secretly pinning away for her.

But that hadn't been the case.

No.

He hadn't known what to say.

Brilliant.

AN/: So, El's done it! But Mike still won't budge. Let's carry on hating him...Heads up: the downward spiral is coming...

9. May

AN/: So, lovely readers as your reward for enduring Mike, I'm posting everything I've got. That way you can move quickly around the story and not despair (even more, anyway...) at his behavior. Binge away!

And again, thanks for your interest in the story and your reviews :)

May

Things did get weird.

After the last essay was submitted in April, the remaining days of the month were dedicated to study for finals –all due in May– and the upcoming months for completing their dissertation and submit it on August 19th. That day would mark the final deadline of their master's program.

Mike had prompted the group to get together and do some study sessions, so a couple days a week the Party hung out in coffee shops or the library. He was adamant that they would get more benefits from studying together than by themselves. El disagreed. She loved libraries, but she found them distracting. She preferred the comfort of her own room, with her music and easy access to her fridge and coffee maker.

Plus, she really didn't want to be near Mike.

Things between them had been...tense lately. They were supposed to be ok, but a sort of awkwardness had settled between them, like a huge white elephant loitering around any room they were in.

After her fateful confession, El had tried her best to act normal around Mike. He on the other hand, appeared to be more careful, not cracking as many jokes as he used to and being quieter in her presence. Still, this situation of polite endurance seemed to be hanging by a thread.

El wasn't bitter about the whole matter, just a bit down. She just

wanted to focus on her dissertation and get through her finals unscathed. And maybe to finally move past what she considered had been a complete and utter failure. She was proud of her act of bravery, but that didn't mean it wasn't disappointing. She had gambled, and she had lost.

That was the main reason why she didn't want to study with the group, because he would be there. And El was trying to spend as little time as possible with him. She still went out with the Party, but always tried to put some distance between them.

Mike seemed to be irritated by her negative to his invitation to join them at their study sessions, apparently not buying into her excuses for not going. Thankfully though, he didn't comment. At least not directly to her, because he often made furtive remarks alluding her, going on and on about how their sessions were super useful and gave them the opportunity to deeply examine some of the most difficult topics that would be on the tests.

She chose to ignore them.

Finally, it was time to take Moira's test. That day El noticed a change in their already frail relationship, a change for the worse. Mike was acting weird since he arrived to meet them at the hall's entrance where they were supposed to take the test, not really greeting them and just talking to the others as if she wasn't there. It wasn't that he was excluding her, but he wasn't talking to her directly, barely acknowledging her presence.

El immediately took notice of his distant behavior and decided to overlook it, concentrating all her efforts on the upcoming test. He could ignore her all he wanted.

Some days later, he was still being difficult and unpleasant. But what really pissed her off was his reaction to Max's honest mistake when she asked on their group chat if she and Mike were together at some party in Kensington.

El had declined to attend to some bash at the university and unbeknownst to her, Mike also had other plans, specifically the party in Kensington. So, when Max found out that neither of them

would be attending to the university's party, she figured that maybe they were attending to the Kensington party together and decided to ask.

She hadn't told Max yet about her chat with Mike back in April and El hadn't really talked about their recent distance either, so Max's question was completely innocent and well-meant.

-Maxi:

Mike are you with El?

-Mike Wheeler:

What? For fuck's sake, no!

-Maxi:

God, Wheeler, chill out. It was just a question, seeing that she told me she wasn't going to the Uni's party either. I thought she might be with you that's all.

-Mike Wheeler:

Well, she's not.

-Maxi:

Clearly...

His quick dismissal of her and his crass reaction hurt her deeply. A simple 'no' would have sufficed. He didn't have to be an asshole about it.

It's not as if I have a contagious disease or something...asshole.

And that was the day she stopped trying. His disdain for her fractured any traces of resolve she may have left to fight for what remained of their friendship.

What is the point of trying to stay friends with him? He clearly doesn't care, so why should I?

The next time they saw each other was at Lucas' birthday party. She didn't even bother to say hi.

When she arrived at the club, the Party was already there, plus some of Lucas's friends from his dorm. She and Will had arrived early but had elected to grab a bite to eat outside the club before getting into party mood.

She greeted her friends coolly purposely ignoring Mike, taking advantage of the hustle of being introduced to Lucas' friends and the fact that the club was packed and loud. Nobody seemed no notice this and she didn't look at him to see if he even cared.

El ordered a cosmopolitan and sat between Max and Will. They were talking lively when *Despacito* came blaring through the club's speakers. Max and El let out a squeal and the three of them instantly stood up and hit the dancefloor. El moved around feeling the beat, happily shouting the lyrics of the song while singing along exaggeratedly with Max and Will.

One of Lucas' friends (she couldn't remember his name) joined them and smiling politely, gestured to El if they could dance. She nodded, and he took her hands to guide them around his neck, while his went around her waist. El smiled at him and kept dancing sensuously, now in the company of the handsome stranger; unaware that at the other side of the small dancefloor, Mike watched the whole exchange with a glowering face.

Not soon after that, he left the club, excusing himself with Lucas' on the pretense that he was tired and had an early day tomorrow.

El kept on having fun dancing, while trying to ignore the pang she felt as she slowly began to accept that their friendship was unequivocally over.

AN/: Somebody is having a hard time letting go...

10. June-July

June / July

Throughout June and July El focused on finishing her dissertation to have some time to enjoy her summer. She had an upcoming trip she was looking forward to and the more she worked, the more she would be able to enjoy herself, free of any academic responsibility.

Her friend Steve Harrington was coming to Europe for work and had some free days to visit her and travel for a bit. She would be his tour guide through London and together they would spend some days in Spain. Steve was one of El's best friends back home, they had met in college a while back and had been close ever since.

During these two months she only saw Mike one time. And she didn't know it then, but it would be the last time she would see him before returning home to Hawkins.

Steve had arrived in the city a couple of days ago and they had been doing all the sightseeing, classic touristy stuff. Tonight, though they were meeting the Party for some old-fashioned drinks at the pub. When they got there, she was relieved to see that Mike wasn't there and probably wouldn't be joining them. She introduced Steve to everyone and they both went to the bar for their drinks.

Steve had taken a detour to the bathroom and El returned to the table alone. She noticed that he wasn't back yet and she looked up at the bar just in case he was waiting for her. To her surprise it wasn't Steve's heavily groomed, Farah Fawcett's lion-like mane, she saw but Mike's familiar, tall silhouette. She cringed inwardly.

Soon, he made it back to the table and as she expected it he ignored her, just as he ignored Steve when he came back, glaring at him a suspiciously. Suddenly she really didn't want to be there.

Steve, having been warned by El about the possible awkwardness if they ever ran into Mike, and out of loyalty, ignored Mike in return; not making any attempt to introduce himself or even acknowledge his presence.

El was handling it well though. She was happy to see her friends again after being cooped up for so long working on her dissertation. She was excitedly chatting about their upcoming trip to Spain and recounting stories about her and Steve in college; to the Party's amusement.

Not to Mike's though, he could only look at her dashing –arrogant he would say– friend, with an expression akin to contempt.

"...of course, I liked him since the first moment I met him, I mean look at this hair all fluffy and lovely. Makes you want to put your hands all over it". El explained and mischievously brought her hands to his head to ruffle it.

"Hands off the hair Ellie!" He shouted, almost knocking his beer to the ground.

El giggled and rumbled it even more to Steve's chagrin.

"Lay off my hair if you please, El. You know I will tell Hopper about it!" He warned. She just giggled harder but let go of his hair.

"Obviously, we soon realized we were better off as friends". She explained, continuing her story about how the two of them met.

"Yeah, she was just a pain in the ass, really. Still is!" He said as a matter of fact.

"Hey! I resent that!". She cried poking his shoulder good-humoredly.

"Well, I do have to say it's a shame, because your babies would have been lovely". Max remarked in all honesty. Not with the intention of pissing Mike off. Never that.

Steve seemed to pick up on Max's purpose and wickedly followed her lead.

"You never know Max, there's still time". He responded while making lovey-dovey eyes at El and taking her hand delicately. "I'm sure Ellie Jr would have my lovely hair and her beautiful doe eyes".

She just chuckled and swatted his arm playfully.

The others joined laughing, while Mike was doing a terrible job at dissimulating his discomfort at the thought of El and Steve's babies. He was staring blankly at his beer, lips sealed in a tight line and looking slightly flushed.

Lucas seemed to notice, and oblivious to his friend's distress, out of sincere concern he asked:

"Mike? Hey man are you ok? You look a bit queasy".

"Huh?" He responded numbly, looking up from his beer.

"He asked if you were ok Wheeler?" Max clarified in turn. "It's the weight of reality too much for you to handle?" She added perversely.

El had finally told Max everything that had transpired between them and Max was of course on El's side. She wasn't about to go easy on Mike.

"I'm fine. Must be something I ate earlier". He answered quietly, though not without glaring at Max as if she had just killed his kitten.

El turned her eyes on him briefly, a bit worriedly but quickly shrugged it off.

Perceptively, Steve decided it was probably a good moment to take their leave. He turned to El and asked:

"Should we go? I want to see Tower Bridge at night before we leave for Spain". He said sounding excited.

"Sure, we have an early day tomorrow anyway. We are going to Stonehenge!" She told them eagerly, as she got up from her chair.

"Yay!" Steve mocked faking a high-pitched tone.

"Well see you around guys!" El said as they walked off.

"Nice to meet you!" Steve waved, trailing behind El.

"They sure look cute together, don't they?" Dustin observed light-heartedly, after they left.

Mike glared at him and threw a potato chip at his head.

"Shut up Dustin!" He said moodily.

"What? They do Michael!" He snapped at him, throwing the chip back at him.

The others burst out laughing at their bickering, with Will having to eventually step between the two of them before they got into a fist fight.

"So, you really like this guy huh Ellie? Want me to kick the dipshit's ass?" Steve asked her as they walked side by side along the river bank.

"Liked, Steve, past tense". She said testily.

"Hey! I'm just making sure". He said raising his hands in mock surrender.

"No really, do you want me to throw him over into the Thames? You know I could totally do it, he's too skinny to take me..." He continued teasingly.

El giggled wholeheartedly.

"As much as I think that would be very funny, please don't. You can't just go around chucking bodies into the Thames anymore Steve, it's not politically correct". She added, trying to sound serious.

They both burst out laughing and Steve hugged her to him softly, kissing her forehead tenderly.

"You'll be alright, Ellie; you always are".

El just relished in the feeling of comfort his old friend brought her, trusting that indeed she would be alright.

AN/: These last two chapters are basically to show El's progress at feeling better, and that Mike is starting to really feel the weight of his

decision (and that he is still ever-jealous but won't do anything about it, the little dipshit...). And of course, Steve made an appearance! Because why not? :D

11. August

August

August proved to be an interesting month. Summer was in full bloom and everyone at university seemed to be running around to meet the dissertation's deadline. El didn't see much of the Party these days, but she had started seeing more of Antoine.

As per usual, they had run into each other in their building. They got to talk and ended up enjoying the summer night drinking out in the courtyard. They talked about a lot of things and he asked her about Mike. She wasn't too keen on discussing her failure, so she stuck to the basics and explained that she and Mike weren't talking to each other anymore, but that she was over him. A half lie, of course, but he didn't need to know that.

Submission deadline was fast approaching, and they wanted to enjoy the rest of the summer before returning home in September, so they tried to see each other and hang out when they weren't writing. Sometimes Antoine would come up to her room to watch the latest episode of Game of Thrones or they would go to the park and have a drink. She usually had a good time with him.

It was after one of these outings, when the dissertation was done and the last weeks of August loomed, that El was struck with the thought of hooking up with Antoine. She considered her year carefully, filled with longing for Mike and meeting weird guys whom she didn't want to date...and then she thought about Antoine. Now single and spending a lot of time with her.

She felt she deserved to have some fun and well, he was a nice guy after all. Besides, El knew she didn't feel anything remotely romantic towards him, he could be her brief summer fling. She felt she could enjoy casual with him, no strings attached. And for once, be the one taking a page out of Mike's book.

And who knows, maybe he was the adventure she needed to forget about Mike completely. Or maybe they would have such a good chemistry that they could become something more...She wouldn't

mind moving to France...El was definitely willing to give it a try.

Determined, she decided to invite Antoine to a rooftop cinema near the Tate Modern that would take place next Friday. There would be a screening of Jim Jarmusch's 'Only Lovers left alive' she knew he would like. Plus, it would be the perfect opportunity to make her move.

She quickly texted him and he said yes. Giddy about her success, she called Max, feeling in dire need of some quality girl time.

They met up soon after and went for a pint. Max was a bit surprised when she told her about her decision to pursue something with Antoine but was very supportive nonetheless. It was about dam time she enjoyed herself, she told her.

That was on Tuesday. On Wednesday morning, as she was walking to the gym, El's phone buzzed with a text from Mike to their group chat.

-Mike Wheeler:

Hey guys...so, I'm returning home on Saturday and well, I thought maybe we could go for some farewell pints? Friday night?

-Mike Wheeler:

I hope you can make it and if I don't see you, know it's been a pleasure to meet you all.

El stopped walking and reread the texts carefully. He was leaving. She wouldn't see him again. Probably never.

His unexpected announcement caught her unaware. It sounded so final. She had thought that they would have more time. That somehow, they would patch things up before returning to their past lives. She held no expectations about them, not anymore; but she had wanted for them to remain friends at the very least.

Does he want me to go?

Also, the irony of the whole situation wasn't lost to El: Mike's farewell

was going to be on the same night she planned to sleep with Antoine.

She found herself at a crossroads: give up Antoine and the night she had been carefully planning and go to Mike's farewell party; or keep up with her plan and bury the last shred of their friendship forever.

Because El was sure that Mike would never forgive her for not saying goodbye.

Would that be true though? Would he care that much?

El didn't know what to think. Or what to do. She ignored the texts from the others, lamenting his leaving so soon and agreeing to go to the party on Friday, remaining quiet and continuing her way to the gym.

At 10 pm that Friday, the Party was already at Mike's farewell. They were distributed in two large tables that hosted friends from his building and their master's program.

Mike was seated with the Party, sharing pints, laughing and reminiscing about their year. When a comfortable silence fell between them, he took the opportunity to ask something that had been bugging him all night.

"So, umm...Max do you know if El is coming tonight?" He asked her, looking a bit uncomfortable.

Max took pity on him and lied.

"Uh, hmm, I don't really know..." She said awkwardly, not even meeting his eyes. Lucas and Will pretended to be interested on their drinks and Dustin...he chose that precise moment to return from the bathroom.

"Didn't she have her big date tonight? You know where she planned to seduce Antoine once and for all? She was super excited about that right? I mean she's liked him since she got here..."

Everyone froze at his words and looked at him pointedly, but it was too late. Dustin had rambled way too far.

"What? What did I say?" He asked confused by the stares he was receiving.

Soon, realization dawned on him when he saw the unexpected flash of pain appear momentarily on Mike's face.

And it was then that the Party finally saw through him. For the expanse of two seconds his eyes gave him away and confirmed what they had suspected for the better part of the year: Mike did feel something for El.

And for the looks of it was more than plain friendliness. Way more.

"Oh...buddy". The sympathy (or was it pity?) in Dustin's voice shook him out of his reverie and he pulled up his walls again.

"Oh well, that's totally fine right? Antoine is a very nice guy. Super nice, in fact. How about I get the next round, huh?" Mike got up and left the table, never mind that none of them weren't even nearly finished with their pints.

Concerned, they all looked at each other wearily.

"I'll talk to him". Will said, getting up and chasing after their friend. He caught up with him at the bar.

"You ok Mike?"

"Sure. Just peachy". Will shot him a look, arching his eyebrow disbelievingly.

"Bullshit". For a minute he felt a sense of déjà vu, remembering the similar conversation he had with El back in February.

How did he get stuck between two of the most stubborn people he had ever met?

And then Mike exploded.

"How can she like Antoine?! He's a great pompous ass who probably eats too much cheese and drinks fancy French wine for breakfast..."

"Think you're better suited for her?" Will taunted.

"No...maybe...I don't know!" He sighed dejectedly and stared at the ground.

Will only smiled sympathetically. Not really knowing what to say, he patted his back in a comforting gesture.

"You know, I really thought she would come tonight. To say goodbye. Guess I don't mean that much to her..." He said miserably.

Will felt his anger stir at his words.

"You're mistaken Mike. You didn't have to listen to her for the past year...to comfort her while you were out chasing anything that moved". He said bitterly.

"But Will, I never led her on! She fell for me all on her own!"

Will felt like punching him.

"Didn't you? Why all the attention then? Why the flirting? The not-so-subtle jealous outbursts? We are not stupid Mike, we all noticed..."

Mike just stared at him in silence, not really knowing how to respond. Will continued frankly, not caring if the truth made his friend feel bad.

"All this, while she was right there, just waiting for you to make up your mind". And as an afterthought, he added: "Maybe it's a good thing she and Antoine finally got it right".

Hurt flashed across Mike's face once more, but Will didn't feel guilty. He thought it was about damn time someone told him the harsh facts.

"Yes, well she can date whoever she wants". He said unconvincingly, and Will snapped again.

"Listen to what you're saying! You are making a fool of yourself Mike. You either like her or you don't. And if you don't then do me a favor and leave her alone. You had a year and you blew it. Maybe it's time to move on".

Mike had the decency to look ashamed. He nodded miserably, and Will squeezed his shoulder reassuringly.

"I'm sorry Will, you're right".

"No worries Mike. So, what are you going to do?"

He smiled sadly and shook his head softly.

"Nothing. I think it's pretty clear that El deserves some happiness and all I seem to do is hurt her".

"But Mike, how do you know? You haven't even tried..."

"Will, she doesn't deserve a guy like me. I've spent the whole year afraid of falling for her, not realizing that the more I struggled against my feelings, the more I fell in love with her".

He paused, trying to find his next words.

"Now...it's too late. We are not even talking, and our year is up. We are all going back home to our lives...so what's the point? She's better off without me, I've just brought her heartache. Even when she had the guts to tell me how she felt, I just...cowardly froze..." He trailed off, mournfully.

Will felt terrible for his friend and truthfully a bit disappointed. Mike still didn't believe he was good enough.

"Mike I'm sorry for what I'm about to say but...if you don't believe she is worth fighting for, then you are right, she doesn't deserve you".

Mike lowered his eyes to the ground sadly, admitting defeat.

"C'mon, let's get those beers. It's your last night here after all". Will told him, completely aware that this was a lame attempt to lift his spirits.

In the meantime, El was enjoying her stroll around the Thames, her arm hooked around Antoine's, savoring in the feeling of the cool breeze as it hit her face. The movie had finished, and they were

heading home unhurriedly.

Though she was having a great time, she couldn't help but feel a pang in her heart at the thought of her friends bidding farewell to Mike and she not being there to do the same. As if on cue, Antoine spoke.

"So, Mike is leaving tomorrow huh? He invited me to his farewell party...I'm surprised you're not there actually".

"Yes, well...this was more important to me".

Liar!

After much thinking El had decided that she needed this. She was sad that Mike was leaving so soon and that their friendship was over, but she was also hurt about the way he had treated her these past months. Besides, she was pretty sure he didn't want her there.

So, yeah, she had decided that Antoine was more important. That this time pursuing a more plausible shot at happiness was more important.

He smiled politely at her words, and she knew he didn't believe her. So, she tried harder.

"No, really Antoine. I've been thinking...and I like you. Since we first met...but then you had a fiancé and then I was hung up on Mike... But now we are both free so..." She trailed off uncertainly and she kissed him, trying to convey what she wanted with her actions.

After a beat she pulled away. Antoine just stared at her astonished.

"Wow."

"Yes, wow". She said smiling awkwardly. He seemed to think for moment.

"I'm game if you are..." He said grinning.

"Then let's get out of here!"

They practically ran to the tube. And soon enough they were in El's

bed heavily making out.

She felt stupid to be thinking about it, but she had felt more the few times that Mike had hugged her, than with Antoine kissing her and grinding against her. He seemed to notice that he wasn't having any effect on her because at that moment he stopped and El felt grateful.

"You ok?" He asked concerned.

"Yes, sorry. I got distracted for a minute". She said, slightly embarrassed.

She kissed him again, but Antoine pulled away.

"El, are you sure about this?" He asked, concerned.

Truth to be told, she wasn't. It had all seemed like such a good idea in the beginning...and now she felt uncertain. Antoine's kisses felt like wet, sloppy caresses and his hands didn't make her feel tingly or shudder with excitement. Her face fell for a moment, as she saw her plan crumbling before her.

But her resolve got the better of her and she finally relented.

"Yes, I am".

AN/: So, will El and Antoine live happily ever after? Maybe somewhere in the lovely south of France?

Just kidding...next chapter is up... (spoiler alert: you're going to love it...hopefully ;).

12. December Part I

3 months later...

December

Part I

Life after London seemed a bit dull for El. She had returned home and spent some time with her family. But she missed her friends and their crazy outings, she missed the nightlife, the theatre, the parks... she simply missed London.

She kept in touch with the party, with the obvious exception of Mike, chatting almost daily with Will and Max. She knew –through Max– that Dustin and Mike had gotten jobs in New York; Will had elected to move to San Francisco to pursue a more holistic approach to psychology through art and Max had returned home to L.A. where she was working in a community center alongside Lucas. They were already planning to visit each other, sometime over the course of the next year.

She also missed Mike. They hadn't talked since last spring, since he had started to pretend she didn't exist anymore. Everyday that passed El thought about him less and less, finally starting to forget that chapter of her life and slowly accepting that he had become someone that she used to know.

At times she felt guilty about not saying goodbye and wanted to call him to apologize, mostly for the memory of the friendship they once had; but she would end up convincing herself that stirring things up would be a bad idea, better leave them as they were. Maybe it was for the best.

Fortunately, not everything was bleak for El. Soon after her arrival she was hired by the University of Indianapolis as a researcher and to teach at undergraduate level. El couldn't be happier, settling swiftly and comfortably into her new life.

It was now December and a cold breeze hit El abruptly as she left the

Psychology building, causing her to adjust her coat tightly around her neck. Friday night meant that the campus wasn't too crowded, the students undoubtedly having a good time in one of the many bars near university. Her plans for the evening were more peaceful: grab a bite to eat, shower and cuddle up with a good book. Luckily, her place wasn't far, so she usually walked through campus and was home after a short 5 minutes' walk.

As she approached her building she noticed there was someone sitting on the steps of the main entrance, it looked like a man, a tall man with unruly black hair. And though she couldn't look at his face, obscured by the book he was reading, her heart leaped in her chest in recognition.

It couldn't be...could it?

Her suspicions were confirmed as she reached the steps and stood in front of the stranger.

"Mike...?!" She said tentatively.

He looked up from his book, startled by her presence and instantly jumped to his feet.

"Hi El". He said nervously, fidgeting with the book.

"What...how did you...what are you doing here?!" She asked him, visibly shaken by his unexpected appearance.

"Ehh...I'm sorry to just come in unannounced. Will gave me your address and well...can we talk?" He looked at her anxiously, but with clear determination and a glint of hopefulness in his eyes.

"Uh, sure. Come in". El was genuinely confused by his sudden arrival and she felt uneasiness beginning to settle in the pit of her stomach.

They climbed the steps and reached her door quickly, quietly. She opened it and motioned for him to come in, settling her bags and keys on the dining table. In the meantime, Mike was looking at her apartment curiously, appreciating the subtle details that made it undeniably El's. His perusal ended when he felt her staring at him and he turned to meet her gaze.

Her doe eyes observed him silently. And instantly, he felt his palms get sweaty and the air grow thick.

"Can I offer you..."

"I'm sorry E..."

The both spoke at the same time and abruptly fell silent. After a beat, a timid smile reached their faces.

"You go first". El managed to say.

Mike nodded and took his time to gather his thoughts. He decided then, that he would just say it. No more hiding. No more running.

"I'm in love with you El".

El's eyes widened disbelievingly and her heart stopped for a moment.

"Sorry, what?" She blurted.

He came closer, so close she could feel his breath on her face; it smelled like mint and coffee with a hint of chocolate. He gently took her by the arms, pulling her closer and his eyes searched hers desperately, trying to convey his feelings without any misinterpretation.

"I love you El. So dam much". He said solemnly.

Disbelief was still etched across her face. Her brain trying to process his words, but all she could think about was the impossibility of this moment. Not after everything that she had been through.

"No, you don't." She said, trying to get away from his invasive –and very distracting– presence. This just made him tighten his hold on her.

"Yes, I do". He said determinedly, not taking his eyes away from hers.

"No, you..." Her denying remark was interrupted by his exasperated voice.

"Oh, for the love of god woman!" He cried out, as he pulled her to him and kissed her passionately, successfully silencing her stubborn and misguided interpretation of his feelings.

Mike poured everything into that kiss, all the pent-up frustration from over a year, all the anger he felt at himself for not being brave enough to admit his feelings for her...and all the longing that had almost consumed him whole.

El thought it was glorious.

His soft lips were caressing hers languidly, unhurriedly but with an unmistakable fire that manifested itself when his tongue tentatively stroked hers, seeking entrance. She opened her mouth wider and let him in, slowly melting at the invasion, prompting her to push her body deeper into his, desperately wanting to feel him even closer.

Mike's hands had made their way to her lower back, slowly caressing her and dangerously going under her shirt, making delicious contact with her skin. El let out a throaty moan that only fueled his movements, going further up until his hands reached the hem of her bra.

Meanwhile, El's arms had gone around his neck at some point and her hands were tangled in his hair, rubbing him sensuously, scraping her nails gently through it. He groaned at the feel of her hands...

...and then her phone rang.

They both jumped apart at the sound, shaken by the intensity stirred by their kiss. The phone rang once more.

Dazedly, she made her way to the table, took the phone out of her bag and answered.

"Will, this is not a good time. Can I call you back?"

"I figured, has your surprised arrived yet?"

"If you mean Mike, yes he's here".

"Nice. How is that going?"

She blushed and turned her gaze away from Mike. "It's going...well, it's a bit intense at the moment".

"Hmm...Well, I'll leave you to it then. Call you tomorrow?"

"Sure! And Will? Thanks".

"Don't mention it Ellie. Bye!"

She turned to face him and there he was, with an air of resolve around him and a strong look on his face.

"Soooo...you love me huh?" She joked, trying to break the silence that had befallen them after Will's call.

His face broke into a huge grin and rapidly he was in front of her again, though his hands were kept at his sides, as if restraining himself from touching her.

"I do. But the question is, do you love me El?" Her gaze fell to the floor under the intensity she found in his eyes.

She didn't know how to answer his question. Her self-preservation instinct was telling her to run, leave him at her place and figure it all out tomorrow. Sensing her hesitation, he continued.

"I know I screwed up and I'm sorry for it, for everything...And I know I don't have the right to ask but...will you give me a chance? To make it up to you? To give this... 'us', the opportunity I refused to give us in London?"

El didn't know what to say, too stunned to utter a single word.

At her prolonged silence, he panicked and turned away from her. He ran a hand through his hair in frustration and started rambling nervously.

"I should have called right? I knew this was impulsive, but Will thought that maybe I still had a shot and well, I wanted to believe it too... Oh god you're probably still with Antoine...but Will didn't say...I understand if you don't want anything to do with me, I do really. I deserve it, truly, for being a mouthbreather throughout last

year, such a wastoid..."

"Mike, I forgive you". El interrupted, touching his back gently to get him to look at her.

"...I should just leave, really...what?" He seemed to realize that she had spoken.

"I forgive you...do you forgive me?"

At his puzzled look she elaborated.

"For letting you leave without saying goodbye? For not trying harder to keep our friendship afloat? After all, we were friends first". She said with a sad smile.

"Don't beat yourself up El, I didn't give you any reasons to remain my friend either. It's me who screwed things up".

She nodded slowly, and silence fell over them again until a thought suddenly struck her.

"What do you want Mike?" El needed to know what he expected from this. From her.

"I want you El, in whatever terms you want us to exist. If Antoine is in the picture I understand, I'll settle for being your long-distance friend. But I don't want us to be angry anymore". He said seriously. She nodded understanding.

"Antoine is not here Mike, he stayed in France, where he belongs".

"Oh".

"I...I don't know what to say". She said uncertainly.

At her words, he grimaced remorsefully. "I guess I deserve that".

"What? Oh!" She realized the significance of her words. She shook her head vigorously. "No Mike, I'm not trying to get back at you or something...I guess I'm just scared".

"Scared?"

"Yes. Of opening up again. What if you wake up tomorrow and then decide that this was just a flight of fancy? That you want your freedom back, that you don't...really love me". She finished quietly.

Mike's heart broke as he realized the magnitude of the damage he had caused. He nodded dejectedly but didn't give up. There was too much at stake and this time he wasn't going to ruin it.

"El, I can't promise you I will never hurt you again, but please trust that this is real. I've been fooling myself and I've been miserable about it. I don't want anyone else now and I didn't want anyone else last year...I just kept telling myself that everything was fine and using sex as a distraction from what I didn't want to face". He told her sincerely.

"Was it so bad? The idea of us? That you had to escape reality?" She asked bitterly.

"No! No, no El. Please never believe that. I was scared of...feeling something, specially something as intense as what I felt for you. I guess I've been running away from my feelings for a while now, even before I met you". He explained, somewhat ashamed of himself.

El stood quietly contemplating his face, watching the remorse evident across his features, and against her better judgement she decided to say yes. She didn't how they would make it work but she wanted to take the chance she didn't have in the beginning and let it become whatever it was supposed to be from the start.

"Yes".

"What?!" He looked up surprised.

"Yes, Mike. I would like for us to try". She clarified softly.

Still feeling her hesitation, he added: "How about we take things slow? Get to know each other better, without me being annoying" – that got him a timid half smile from her– "...and see how everything goes?"

She seemed to consider it for a moment and after what felt like an eternity to Mike, she nodded.

"I would like that". Relief flooded through him and huge grin appeared on his face, infecting El, whose face lit up at seeing the happiness he displayed, mirroring hers.

"What were your plans for the weekend? I'm sorry to crash in like this, it was a rash decision..." He said smiling sheepishly. She smiled softly in turn.

I missed this, his face, his silly smiles...

"I'm set to go home for Christmas break, I'm leaving tomorrow". She said tentatively, watching the instant disappointment on his face.

"Oh. Well...maybe I can come before you leave, we could have some breakfast and then see you off?"

"I would like that". She said timidly.

"Cool, so I'll see you tomorrow? Nine-ish?" He sounded excited, like the Mike she used to know.

"Yes".

They awkwardly stepped closer to hug each other and say goodbye. El closed her eyes and sighed contently, savoring the feel of his arms around her and enjoying his unique scent.

As they pulled away slowly, almost reluctantly, they stared at each other. Their eyes subconsciously went to their lips and when their gazes met again both were burning with newfound hunger.

In a matter of seconds, their lips crashed eagerly, each devouring the other as if there was no tomorrow. Hands were everywhere, clumsily reaching out for any part of the other they could touch.

As air became necessary they pulled away breathlessly, panting and looking at each other wildly.

"Screw slow Mike, a year dancing around each other is slow enough

for me". She said passionately.

"Agreed". He said as he kissed her again and hoisted her up pulling her to him, wrapping her legs around his middle and grabbing her backside to support her against him. El moaned happily at the feel of his hands and his lips on her again.

He mumbled something incomprehensible, but El caught his meaning and broke the kiss momentarily.

"Second door to the right". Her lips went back to him but this time to his neck, making it difficult for Mike to focus enough to find their destination.

Miraculously, they made it to her bedroom without stumbling.

"What happened to your rule about no casual sex?" He teased.

"We' are anything but casual Michael, now shut up and kiss me".

He smirked and obliged her. His lips brushed hers with new intensity, his tongue stroking hers sensuously. Mike moved towards the bed until the back of his knees touched the edge and gave in, leaving him seated with El straddling his hips.

They moaned as their new position deepened the contact. Their lips left each other, both panting and overwhelmed, and their foreheads came together, trying to recover their breath and some semblance of control over their bodies.

El, seemingly the first of them to regain some self-control, kissed him sweetly and then pulled back, looking at him intently. She pulled her blouse through her head under Mike's attentive gaze. She was wearing a black lacey bra that hugged her breasts perfectly.

Entranced by the sight of her, shirtless and flushed with desire, Mike's hands slowly reached for her sides and caressed her gently. Then he delicately touched her back and in a rush of crushing tenderness he hugged her, kissing the skin between her neck and shoulder, half in awe, half in gratitude for giving him a chance.

El seemed to grasp the rush of feelings that possessed him and

hugged him tightly, doing her best to not ruin the moment by crying all over him.

They pulled away unhurriedly, looking into each other's eyes and their passion was ignited once more. They frantically kissed, El running her hands through his hair and his back, going under his shirt; while Mike undid the clasp of her bra and pulled away from her to remove it completely.

He paused at the sight of her bare chest and reverently stroked her breasts softly. At the sensation, El threw her head back in abandon, groaning quietly. Soon his hands were replaced by his mouth, kissing her neck, collarbone and breasts.

She was trying hard to concentrate on undoing the buttons of his white shirt but was having a difficult time with him all over her chest. Suddenly she pulled his head upward and kissed him, while ripping his shirt open, causing the buttons to fly in every direction. Startled, Mike pulled away to look at the mess and then at El, one eyebrow raised challengingly.

At his questioning look, she scowled.

"A year Mike! A year!"

Chuckling, he raised his hands in mock surrender and she took the opportunity to pull his shirt down his arms, finally exposing him to her hungry gaze. Mike was silent as she perused him, allowing her some space for her appraisal. She ran both hands through the expanse of his broad chest and looked up again. She kissed him tenderly and pulled him closer.

They both shivered at the contact of their bare skin, once again fueling their desire. Eagerly, Mike stood up, turned to the bed and laid El on her back, still kissing each other wildly. He broke the kiss and slowly started to make his way down her body, kissing her neck and leaving a wet path down to the center of her chest.

Mike focused on her nipples, sucking and lapping at them gently, while El sunk deep into the cushions on the bed, moaning desperately at the sensations he was eliciting. Deftly, he undid the button of her

jeans and his right hand went under her underwear, making contact with her clitoris. She hissed in pleasure and grabbed his hand, pushing it even harder against her.

Meanwhile, Mike kept kissing her upper body downward, until he got to the hem of her panties. He withdrew his hand and gently pulled at her jeans, bringing them down her thighs. El lifted her hips and helped him get them off, kicking her heels in the process. Her panties followed suit and El found herself bare to his gaze.

Mike sat on his heels observing her intently. El laid spread out on her bed, legs slightly open, heaving and glistening with arousal.

"You are beautiful El". He said huskily, voice deep with desire. El smiled and swiftly sat on the bed, moving to straddle him. She kissed him while running her hands through his back, grazing his buttocks and taking pleasure in the feeling of her core grinding against his denim-clad erection.

Her movements were wreaking havoc on his concentration, at this rate he wouldn't last as much as he wanted, so he gently pushed her down and untangled his mouth from her, quickly making his way downwards.

Her moan of protest became one strangled gasp of pleasure as he licked her, getting his tongue deeply into her a vagina and running it towards her clitoris in relaxed strokes. He continued his ministrations, alternating between licking and sucking her clit purposely, while she ran her hands through his hair, pushing his head into her in desperation to reach her orgasm.

Suddenly Mike felt her throbbing, her moans now of relief as she came with a shuddering sigh. He kept lapping at her until he felt her orgasm subside and made his way up to her lips.

Happily sated, she hugged him close and kissed him languorously.

"That was...hmmm..." That was everything she managed to say. Mike smiled and kept kissing her softly, waiting for her to come down from her high.

After a moment, she finally opened her eyes, waking up from her haze.

"Pants. Off. Now". Clearly, her loquacity became severely diminished in the afterglow of orgasm.

He nodded and stood up from the bed. He kicked off his shoes and socks, unbuttoned his jeans and pushed them down along with his boxers. Stepping out of them, he stood before El proudly, watching amusedly as she blatantly studied him.

"Hmmm Mike..." She said appreciatively as she licked her lips greedily at the sight of his naked body. He was...perfect. Broad shoulders, lean stomach, with narrow hips and strong tights. Never mind his thick, gorgeous...

"I'm glad you like what you see". He teased cockily.

She smiled shyly and turned to open her bedside table's drawer, rummaging in it briefly and retrieving a condom. Mike climbed on the bed and knelt beside her, motioning for her to give him the condom, but El withdrew her hand with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

"I think is my turn to play now". And without giving him time to react she kissed him while her right hand started to caress his cock purposely.

Mike let out a moan of surprise at the sudden sensation. Her hand felt amazing on him, carefully going up and down, firmly and gentle at the same time. In fact, it felt a little bit too amazing.

"Wait, wait El, please..." El withdrew her hand and looked at him expectantly. "I want to be inside of you...now". She nodded understandingly and reached around the mattress for the forgotten condom until she finally found it near her feet.

Taking it from her and opening the wrapper, El watched intently as he skillfully put it on, suddenly feeling newly aroused by the simple act. Unbeknownst to her, Mike had been watching her closely and his desire was flaring up at the wanton look in her eyes.

She let out a cry of surprise as he hoisted her up to straddle him, sensuously grabbing her buttocks and getting her closer. Their bodies touching fully, intimately wrapped around each other.

El could feel his penis grazing her entrance and felt a jolt of pleasure at the contact. Taking it in her hand, she guided him into her folds and began to slide down on him excruciatingly slowly; taking enormous pleasure in the sensation of his cock filling her fully.

They both shuddered when he was fully sheathed inside her. El started moving rhythmically up and down on him unhurriedly, making every thrust a delicious torture, while they kissed and nipped at each other.

This didn't last long though, as the intensity of their coupling grew quickly. El's movements became slightly more frantic with Mike meeting her half way, deepening their contact. Knowing she was probably close to coming, he reached a hand down to stroke her clit, which elicited soft moans of pleasure from her.

"Mikeee..." she sighed huskily.

Then her mouth was sucking at the base of his neck, where it met his right shoulder and Mike felt himself get lost in the sensations. He kept his ministrations on her and soon she let out a strangled moan, muffled by her mouth on his skin.

Unexpectedly, she bit him hard as she came. He gasped in surprise at the pleasurable pain and this did it for him. After two more thrusts, he groaned and came strongly.

Panting, he dazedly searched for her mouth and pulled her close for a kiss, tenderly caressing the back of her head. They pulled away slightly, still breathing hard and his forehead nuzzling hers. They smiled softly.

"I love you El".

"I love you too Mike".

He kissed her again softly and hugged her close, before pulling out of her gently. She laid down on her side, still overwhelmed by the

intensity of her orgasm, and watched him as he discarded the used condom. He laid down facing her and pulled her closer to him, so they were touching, legs intertwined and arms around each other. He sighed contently and watched her lazily, the weariness from his flight from New York finally catching up to him.

"Sorry I bit you". She said sheepishly, touching the angry red mark she had left on him.

"Are you kidding me? That was sexy as hell". He said smirking. "I came so hard because of it. I might ask you to do it again next time".

She flushed embarrassingly but smiled at his enthusiasm for a 'next time'.

"Still, I'm gonna kiss it and make it better". She said as she licked the wound soothingly. He laughed and let himself be taken care of, enjoying the feeling of her lips and tongue on his skin.

She pecked him one last time and pulled back.

"There, all done". He smiled tenderly and kissed her again.

Mike felt as if he couldn't stop touching her, he felt the constant need to be in contact with her. It was a feeling that both thrilled him and scared him.

"Thanks".

He closed his eyes briefly and felt suddenly sleepy.

"Mike". El called softly.

"Hmm?" He answered drowsily.

"I'm hungry".

He grinned remembering fondly how important food was to her. Sleep would have to wait and to be honest, he was rather famished himself.

"Me too. We missed dinner". He said as he stroked her side, fully

awake now.

"Want some pizza?"

"God yes".

She smiled excitedly.

"One Margarita, one ham and mushrooms?"

"I knew there was a reason I loved you".

"Just one? Should I be offended?" He laughed and kissed the corner of her mouth in mock repentance.

"Ok, ok pizza first. Otherwise I'll probably pass out from hunger and extreme exertion". He laughed at her dramatics over food and released her hands.

She grinned too and disentangled herself from him to go back to the living room and retrieve her phone. Unashamedly, he propped himself up into his elbow to watch her go, enjoying the view of her naked backside.

She noticed and threw him an amused look. In turn, he smiled cheekily and comically blew her a kiss. She just laughed and exited the bedroom.

Mike let himself fall against the sheets sighing contently. He felt deliriously happy. And it wasn't just the mind-blowing orgasm talking, he genuinely felt something akin to inner peace for the first time in the last few years.

AN/: Finally ;)

13. December Part II

AN/: Thanks for reviewing, I'm glad you've enjoyed the story so far :)

December

Part II

Shortly after, El came back.

"20 minutes tops, I should get some clothes on before the delivery guy shows up".

"Don't worry about that, I can get the pizza. Come back to bed". He half whined, patting the space beside him.

"You just want me naked". She said amusedly.

"Well yes, but I'm also trying to do the gentlemanly thing and get the pizza".

She rolled her eyes at his reasoning and chuckled, plopping down on the bed beside him.

Immediately he pulled her to him kissing her passionately.

She smiled to his lips and pulled away gently. "What was that for?"

He shrugged. "No reason. I suppose it's pent up frustration, not being able to express what I felt and not touching you for more than a year...and now that I can, I plan to make use of every minute I have".

"Hmm that sounds promising". She said suggestively, an evocative glint in her eyes and her fingertips grazing his chest softly.

He smiled and leaned in for another kiss, this one less hurried.

"So what time do you have to leave tomorrow?" He asked as they broke the kiss.

"Oh, I had forgotten about that. Well, I suppose this changes everything. When do you have to return to New York?"

"Monday. I'm also visiting my parents for Christmas break".

"How about I leave on Monday too? That way we can spend the rest of the weekend together".

"Are you sure? I don't want to mess up your plans".

It seemed Mike's new attitude involved having a lot of consideration for her and her plans. She found she quite liked it.

"I'm sure, my parents are not expecting me yet and it's just a short drive to Hawkins anyway".

He beamed at her and nodded happily, while his hand drew lazy patterns on the curve of her hip; very distracting patterns for that matter...

"Besides, I'm kind of fond of this new found submissive disposition you've got going on. I might just make you my slave for the weekend". She teased. "It's a win-win situation for me". El finished, cheekily.

"You've earn it, I'm yours to do what you will of me".

She gave him a brazen look that promised trouble and sexily told him:

"Is that so? I've always wanted to..." And before she finished her sentence she leaned closer to his ear to whisper the rest of her fantasy.

Mike froze, in shock at her words.

"Eleven!" He shouted outraged, looking at her disbelievingly.

"What?" She asked innocently, sweet puppy-dog eyes, voice like honey and a sugary smile.

"That's...that's disgusting!" He responded looking slightly sick.

"Well, you did say you would do anything for me...but I guess it's just all empty promises with you, isn't it?" She said suddenly angry and starting to get up from the bed.

Mike didn't let her, grabbing her arm gently. She stayed and looked at him expectantly, still cross with him.

"Wait please, I'm sorry I overreacted. We can...we can do that whenever you want". He said nervously, swallowing hard.

El burst out laughing at his panicked expression.

"You're such a gullible little boy Michael Wheeler". She told him giggling. "Of course I'm teasing you silly". She explained, beaming and caressing his cheek in a tacitly apologetic gesture.

Mike stared at her dumbfounded, realization slowly registering in his brain that he had just been utterly and unequivocally ridiculed by El. He let out a sigh of relief.

"God El you almost gave me a heart attack!"

She laughed softly and kept caressing his cheek sweetly.

"Get used to it Mike, this is my revenge".

He looked at her narrowing his eyes suspiciously.

"You wouldn't dare".

"Oh, I would". She affirmed determinedly.

He sighed in defeat.

"Fine". He said solemnly, nodding his head in acquiescence.

Suddenly he pounced on her, pinning her to the mattress and tickling her with vengeance.

She yelped in surprise at his sudden attack.

"No, no, Mike! No tickling please". She begged between bouts of laughter, trying to slip away from him.

He took pity on her and stopped, bending his head to kiss her instead.

The doorbell rang and with a groan of frustration they pulled away. He kissed her nose quickly and got up from the bed.

"I'll be back, don't you go anywhere!" El just rolled her eyes at him.

"Where would I go, genius? This is my house". She said, voice dripping with sarcasm. And then she grinned, adding excitedly: "Plus, you know...pizza!"

Mike laughed wholeheartedly and winked. He got into his boxers and pants and quickly padded to the living room.

"Oh, and Mike, there is cider in the fridge, can you bring some when you come back?" She shouted as he left the room.

"As you wish!" He shouted back.

She smiled giddily. Her Friday had turned out to be way better than expected.

"Mike? Can I ask you something?" El asked as she took a sip from her cider. They were eating in bed, clad in their underwear (and Mike's torn shirt in El's case), surrounded by pizza boxes and cider bottles.

"Anything El".

"What made you change your mind? About us, I mean".

He finished his bite and wiped his mouth with a napkin before answering.

"It was Lucas actually". She gave him a questioning look. Lucas had been one of the most reserved members of the Party –at least when it came to their 'thing'–, always keeping to himself and seldomly teasing or commenting on her predicaments with Mike.

Guessing the extent of her thoughts, he continued.

"He's more observant than you think. Besides, I'm sure Max probably complained non-stop about me with him throughout this whole mess, so he must have a detailed account of all my blunders". He explained and El nodded understandingly.

"Lucas basically drilled some sense into me, tired of hearing my –and I quote– 'pathetic voice through the phone, all soaked in depression and death over being away from our girl El'". She giggled at his histrionics, imitating Lucas' tone.

"One day he got fed up and yelled at me. It was pretty scary, and he wasn't even in the room". He explained, with a faraway look on his face.

"Plus, he threatened to tell my mom, so...didn't have much choice". He joked and El giggled again at the look of panic across his face at the thought of getting his mom involved.

"Well remind me to send him a gift basket then". He snorted lightly and nodded.

"You know...I liked you since the first day I met you". He revealed, almost sounding conversational. Though his nervousness at his confession was evident by the way he was fidgeting with the bottle in his hands and his subtle avoidance of her eyes.

"You did?" She asked, surprised by his admission. "How? You barely noticed me, your eyes were glued to your phone almost the whole time". She added, rolling her eyes playfully.

He gave her a mock exasperated look.

"It's a technique. You pretend you are busy with your phone, but you're really paying attention and taking notes in your mind". He explained, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

She laughed.

"You're such a dork Mike".

"You're such a dork Mike..." He repeated in a high pitch voice, imitating her sarcastically.

El swatted his arm playfully, both giggling uncontrollably.

"Well, you should have done something about it". She said, referring to his confession of liking her from the beginning.

"Let's say I was conflicted about the whole thing and you were incredibly intimidating".

She cried out in indignation.

"What? I am not!"

"Are too!"

She arched one eyebrow and crossed her arms, waiting for him to explain.

"You are amazing, you are so smart, you have an opinion about everything, you are confident, and you're gorgeous". He rambled. "Of course, you would intimidate a poor guy!"

"Fine, I'll concede. But you know, you were also intimidating. You proved quickly that you were quite good at seducing women. That, and the fact that you never gave me the time of the day, made me think I wasn't good enough, not pretty enough, not smart enough...I could go on..." She trailed off.

"Please don't. I get the picture. I'm sorry you felt that way". He apologized.

She shrugged. "It's over now anyway".

He nodded and continued.

"I'm not an expert...I guess I just get along with women. Most of them at least, you were always the exception. I was so scared of you! I preferred to get into your nerves instead". He said smiling fondly. "But believe me, you were always in my head. All the time".

"You're cruel". She observed, pouting.

"Teasing you was addictive, the more reactions I got out of you, the

more I wanted". He explained and then he added: "Oh and by the way I do like Eggos, I thought you should know".

"I still remember that argument, you definitely don't like Eggos". She responded with certainty.

"I loveeeee Eggos! I just wanted to get you riled up. You're so unbelievably cute when you're angry". He told her, smiling cheekily.

"Oh shut up!" She exclaimed.

"What?! It's true! That was the whole point of making you angry. In addition, every time I got you annoyed it made me wonder about how it would feel to have all that passion and fire directed at me". He told her, a bit absentmindedly.

El looked at him seriously, with a hint of sadness in her eyes in recollection of her tortuous year.

"All you had to do was ask Mike...almost from the very beginning. And all of 'me' would have been yours". She said huskily. "All the passion, all the fire...everything...burning just for you".

Mike just stared at her in awe, as if she had revealed some wonderful secret he had no idea it existed.

She kept on, slightly digressing. "Well not yours, yours; I am my own person after all but..." He interrupted her with a brief kiss.

"Shush your feminist ramblings, I get it El". He chuckled happily, kissing her again apologetically. El smiled into his mouth, diving into the kiss enthusiastically.

"If it makes you feel better I'm yours too. Only yours. For as long as you'll have me". He told her soberly, once they had pulled away from their kiss.

"I like this deal". She said, taking the bottle from his hands carefully to put it on the floor and getting on his lap to straddle him.

El kissed him slowly, savoring the feeling of his lips on hers and the heat of his chest against her breasts. His hands quickly went to her

hips under his shirt, caressing her softly and pressing her core to his groin. They both moaned at the contact and El could feel his erection growing quickly under her.

Her hands caressed his chest, grazing his nipples, sending shivers through his spine. Mike groaned at the feeling and deepened the kiss, moving his tongue against El's energetically.

He moved his hands from her hips to her breasts, touching them in ghostly caresses; skipping the real contact in order to slip the shirt off her shoulders. She groaned in frustration at the unfulfilling touch and Mike smiled through their kiss, bringing his hands back, running his thumbs across her nipples softly.

She whimpered, breaking the kiss at the intensity of the sensation.

"Mikeeee..." She cried breathlessly, bringing her lips to his again ardently, almost knocking his head on the headboard. Mike kissed her back passionately, desperately pulling her closer to him.

After a few sultrier kisses, El pulled away breathlessly resting her forehead on his.

"I want you". She whispered softly, looking into his eyes with desire.

"You have me El". He whispered back, caressing her cheek.

The significance of his admission didn't go unnoticed by El. It seemed to her that everything he said and did tonight, and probably anything else he ever did in the future; was meant to reassure her that he wasn't going anywhere.

In response, she turned her head slowly and kissed the palm of the hand that was caressing her cheek in a gesture of acceptance and trust. Her mouth lingered for a moment, before reaching his lips, kissing him fully.

After a beat, she started kissing his jaw, making her way to his neck and going towards his nipples. El moved away slightly, sitting on his thighs to gain better access. She trailed her hand down his chest, grazing his muscles teasingly, until it reached her final destination. She cupped him through his boxers, feeling his member twitch at the

contact and Mike let out a gasp of pleasure at her touch.

She kept caressing him, while her mouth and tongue worked on his chest, going down to his navel with the promise of bringing him more pleasure when her mouth reached his cock. With that determination, she hooked her fingers on the waistband of his boxers and tugged them down to his thighs, releasing his erection to her gaze.

Quickly, she took him into her mouth and he moaned at the sensation. She licked him slowly, from the head to the base, teasingly, while cupping his sack and caressing him unhurriedly. Then her head was bobbing, picking up a constant pace, as she sucked him eagerly.

Mike was going insane at the sensations El was creating. His hands had come down to her head, stroking her scalp softly. He was making an effort to avoid pushing her head into him fully for fear of hurting her.

"El...ggrrh...I'm going to come..." He groaned, trying to warn her so she could remove herself from him, but she just intensified her movements. Soon after, he came with a low moan, slumping boneless into the pillows. El kept lapping at him until his cock grew entirely soft.

As deliciously spent as he felt from her ministrations, he managed to tug her up and get her to eye-level, kissing her mouth lazily.

"Hmm, that was intense". He said as he broke the kiss.

She smiled softly at him and kissed the corner of his mouth, before cuddling on him.

"Hey, hey, don't cuddle! I'll be ready in a few minutes".

"Don't worry, I'll be here". She answered simply, enjoying her position on his chest.

He chuckled lightly, running his hand softly up and down her shoulder.

"No time for cuddling". He said, suddenly rolling them so he was on top of her. She squealed, surprised at the unexpected movement and giggled as she saw the pizza boxes tumble to the floor.

Mike attacked her neck mercilessly, sucking and nipping at the sensitive skin. Then he dragged his mouth to her breasts, licking and sucking one nipple while his fingers played with the other. El could only focus on the feel of Mike's hands and mouth on her, barely able to run her own fingers wildly through his hair.

And then his idle hand, which had been resting lightly on her hip, went to her core to caress her through her panties. Soon he deemed her garment offensive and tugged at the hem, pushing the panties down with her help until she kicked them away.

Softly opening her folds, he began to play with her inner lips and clit. El gasped at the contact and whimpered slightly as his fingers increased the intensity of her arousal.

He switched breasts to continue his diligent attention, irreverently using her distraction at the sudden loss of his mouth on her, to insert his index finger into her heat. She moaned lowly at the pleasurable intrusion and he inserted a second finger, while his thumb caressed her clitoris gently. His fingers pumped in and out her, grazing her inner walls delectably, touching her exactly on that precise spot she needed to come.

El was panting harshly, heart beating wildly, and brain turned to mush. She could only feel Mike. Every inch of her body tingled with anticipation at her impending orgasm. Mike kept his fingers moving purposely and his mouth intensely kissing her breast.

A few moments later, she cried out, coming with a trembling sigh.

"Mikeeeeeeeee!"

He smiled into her breast, rejoicing in pure male satisfaction at being the one making her come undone. That and the fact that he was once again rock hard.

With a soft peck on each breast, he got off from her and propped on

his elbow to observe her. She was flushed, heavily panting with her eyes closed, still in the afterglow of her orgasm. He thought she made one of the most erotic sights he had ever seen.

Mike smiled as he saw her open her eyes.

"Hi". He said softly.

"Hi". She replied, a lazy smile on her face. "You are very good at this; did you know that?" She told him almost conversationally, drawing her hand to caress his cheek.

He laughed lightly.

"I try". He answered shrugging.

El smiled and with newfound energy rolled on top of him, straddling him. She lowered herself to kiss him briefly before reaching out at the nightstand for a condom. This time it was Mike watching her closely as she rolled it carefully down his shaft.

She grew hot under his scrutiny, biting her lower lip as she contemplated him. Smiling coyly at him, she bent down to kiss him softly and then lifted herself up to get him inside of her. El took him gently into her hand and lowered herself onto him, Mike's hands firmly on her hips to steady her. They both hissed in pleasure at the delicious friction their joining produced.

El started moving leisurely, up and down on him, hands on his chest and head thrown back in ecstasy. Mike was alternating his hands from caressing her breasts to grabbing her buttocks to meet her thrusts. They reached a stable rhythm, getting hotter by the minute, both panting and moaning passionately.

Mike sat up, reaching for the back of her head to bring her lips to his. They kissed desperately, seeking release; their tongues battling for dominance and their lips bruised from their frantic desire to be closer. Suddenly he flipped them, laying on top of El; now on her back, head resting comfortably against the pillows.

He broke the kiss, taking her thighs and opening them wider, deepening his penetration. El whimpered, feeling him deeper and

relishing in the sensation of his pelvis grinding against her clitoris. His thrusts became quicker and more powerful.

"I'm so close Mike..." She moaned, grabbing his buttocks and pushing him deeper into her.

"God El...me too". He panted, grinding on her with more force and speed.

Mike felt her walls start pulsing and saw her eyes rolling back in her head with pleasure.

"Yessssss..." She half sobbed as her orgasm overcame her.

The sight of her fueled his own race to come, his pace becoming more frantic until he felt the familiar sensation in his lower abdomen and he let himself go.

"El..." He moaned with one final thrust.

She took his flushed face and kissed his mouth sweetly, before cradling his head to her chest.

Mike was panting, heart beating fast and his body still in overdrive. He let El hold him and snuggled easily into her, trying not put his whole weight on her and crush her.

Sensing his hesitation, El held him tighter, signaling with her head for him to let go; she could support his full weight. He did, and they sighed contently.

When they recovered their breaths, Mike pushed himself into his elbows and withdrew his penis from her. He discarded the condom and laid on the bed again, rolling El to lay half on his chest, half on the mattress. She embraced him fully, one arm thrown over his chest and one leg possessively trapping his.

"I don't think I'll ever get tired of doing that". She admitted happily.

He chuckled and bent to kiss her head softly.

"Believe me, neither will I".

She snuggled closer to him and kissed his chest gently.

They stayed awake for a while longer, basking in the afterglow of their reunion and thiking about the promise of many more nights like this one to come.

14. December Part III

AN/: Thanks again for your lovely reviews!

Andy: I hated Mike's behavior too. Would you believe me if I told you he's based on someone I knew?

Guest reviewer: Yes, I got carried away with the smut haha. Sorry, I'm enjoying how happy they are right now and how they still tease each other non-stop. But yeah, in this chapter we get to see what's going to happen with them :)

FangirlingStrangerThings: Yesss, I love them too!

December

Part III

Mike and El spent the remaining part of the weekend in a similar fashion, lazily in bed, alternating between talking, sleeping and making love. They only left the apartment on Saturday to go to his hotel room and retrieve his luggage, but other than that the couple preferred the intimate atmosphere El's apartment provided.

It was already Sunday night, they were lounging in the couch, having just had dinner with some movie they weren't paying attention to playing in the background. They were bickering (what else is new?) about who had been the more jealous of the two during their year in London.

How did they ever get into those topics of conversation was beyond El's understanding...

They seemed to be postponing reality and enjoying their little bubble of love a bit too much. So far, the only thing of relevance they had agreed on was that they would spend New Year's Eve together in New York. Never mind that they had yet to figure out how their interstate relationship was going work.

"Admit it you were jealous".

"I was not!"

She just glared at him knowingly.

"If you could kill someone by glaring at them, Steve would be dead a thousand times already".

After a moment he conceded defeat.

"Ok fine I was super jealous, and I was so angry with myself because I knew it was my own fault. Specially after you told me you had a thing for me".

"Yeah you're such a sucker Mike". She teased, barely able to say it between giggles.

"Hey! Be nice ok? I'm an emotionally challenged man!"

He ruffled her hair in retaliation causing her to squeal.

"I could tickle you, you know?" He warned mischievously.

"I'll lock myself in the bedroom if you do that! And then no more sex for you Mr."

"Ha! Oh sweetheart, you wouldn't last an hour without me". He said smugly.

"Wanna try me?" She challenged, arching her eyebrow.

"Well, no". He said, ending his bluff. "It's my last night here, why would I forsake the pleasure of your delectable company for a stupid challenge?"

She smiled triumphally. "Smart man".

He smiled and bowed his head dramatically in gratitude for the fake compliment.

"C'mon let's go to bed. We do have an early day tomorrow". She told him, standing up and offering her hand to him.

"But it's only like ten". He argued, not really grasping her meaning.

"Yes, but we have...activities that require our attention before any actual sleep is accomplished". She said in mock seriousness.

Realization dawned on him.

"Ah. Smart woman". He took the proffered hand and followed her to the bedroom.

Monday morning came to soon for their liking. El would be driving Mike to the airport and then she would head to Hawkins. They had a small breakfast of coffee, eggs, tomatoes, ham and toasts; cooked by Mike (*Who knew he could cook something other than Eggos?*). Then they showered, packed their things and went on their way.

Before long, they were at the Departures entrance. They stood in front of each other in awkward silence, fidgeting and looking at anything but the other. Until they spoke at the same time.

"So..."

"So..."

Mike smiled but El didn't. Her face a mask of concern and uncertainty.

"I don't want you to leave". She whined, suddenly launching herself into his arms with a force that almost knocked him to the ground.

"I don't want to go". He said, voice slightly muffled by her hair as he held her. El just hugged him tighter.

"But we'll see each other soon". He told her as he pulled away, trying to sound cheerful.

"Yeah, soon". She said unenthusiastically. "What will happen after New Year's Eve though?"

There, the subject was finally on the table. For some reason they had been avoiding broaching the topic of the details of their new relationship.

"We can manage long distance, right? I can come every weekend? And...and you can come to New York too!" He rambled excitedly but sounding a bit too nervous about the whole thing.

The truth was Mike was already ahead of himself thinking about moving to Indiana, but he opted for not telling her that part of his plan. He was afraid it was way too soon to propose something like that. Besides he didn't mind flying over to see her, it wasn't a long flight anyway and he was more than happy to enjoy a break from New York every couple of days.

Mike was also incredibly happy for her and her job at the University and he didn't want her quitting and moving for him. He thought the most sensible thing to do was to go back and forth between the two cities and let the relationship progress until it was a good time for him to move to Indiana.

El nodded sadly.

"Yes, we can manage long distance". She was a bit apprehensive about it but decided to give it a shot.

If this weekend had proved something, it was that not only she wasn't over Mike (like at all...), but that they were good together. Incredibly good. And something that felt so right deserved every chance it could get. She, of course, was more than willing to try.

"See you in two weeks. I love you El".

"Two weeks". She nodded and then threw her arms around his neck, bringing his head down to kiss him sweetly.

"I love you too". She told him softly as their foreheads touched lightly.

He hugged her again and pecked her one last time before disentangling himself from her arms.

"Call me when you get home please".

"You too. Safe flight Mike".

He smiled softly and touched her cheek.

"You too El, drive carefully".

She nodded, touching the hand on her cheek and trying hard not to cry.

Stop being ridiculous, you'll see him again soon.

To make things worse Mike seemed to notice her predicament and of course decided to tease her about it. The bastard.

"Are you...about to cry?" He asked amusedly.

"No". She answered feebly.

"You sure?" He was now sporting a teasingly, knowing smile she didn't like.

Her brow furrowed.

"C'mon, off with you! Your flight is leaving soon, go now! Shoo!" She told him, backing a good two steps away from him and making shooing motions with her hands.

Mike laughed wholeheartedly, striding towards her quickly and taking her into his arms fervently.

"I'm going to miss you too El..." He said sincerely, softly kissing her forehead. "...only I'm not going to cry about it".

"Shut up!" She cried out, hitting his backside lightly in admonition.

He laughed again and hugged her tighter.

The time spent away from Mike felt like ages for El. Funny how life can change so much in a matter of days...

After London, she had settled comfortably into her life, little by little starting to forget about him. Or so she thought, because she had to admit that the second she saw him sitting in the steps of her building,

the myriad of feelings she had been trying to suppress since London, came rushing back to her like a cascade.

Now here she was, longing to have him close and missing him like crazy. Sure, they talked on the phone almost everyday and they shared stupid memes through WhatsApp. Hell, they even had petty debates that ended up becoming flirtatious rambles, with both bursting out in giggles like rowdy teenagers.

Being in a relationship with Mike was everything she had imagined and more. She laughed all the time, she loved his sweet, boyish charm and good-humored nature; and yes, they had fabulous sex. The thought brought a goofy smile to her face.

She was sitting on the steps in the porch of her parent's house, sipping her coffee quietly, just thinking about how lucky she was when her ruminations were interrupted by Hopper. He gave her a half smile and sat beside her with his own cup of the marvelous beverage.

"So, kid what's up with you?"

"Huh? Oh, nothing, just thinking."

"You seem distracted, that's all...is there a boy involved?"

She smiled at her perceptive father and nodded slowly.

"Hmm, so that's why you've been all silly smiles and dreamy eyes since you got here. Should I bring out my gun?" He asked teasingly.

"Hop! Don't be dramatic. Though it would be hilarious to see the look on his face if you did that. I'll think about it when you meet him". She told him giggling.

"'When?' So, this is serious then?"

"Very".

"And why is it just now that I'm hearing about him?" He asked narrowing his eyes.

"Because we just got together last week". At his questioning look, she explained. "We met in London, last year...and for different circumstances we didn't get together until now".

El wasn't about to tell her dad about her ill-fated crush on Mike; if she did, it would certainly guarantee him a serious and terrifying talk with Hopper, indeed involving his gun.

Again, he might just deserve it. El thought naughtily.

She really needed to stop torturing Mike with these silly jokes and teasing.

Did she though?

She smiled inwardly at the thought.

"So, he's the reason you're not spending New Year's with us?"

"Yes, he lives in New York and invited me there to spend it with him".

"Hmm". He grunted noncommittally. "I hope he makes you happy kid". He said hugging her to his side and kissing her forehead softly.

She smiled and let herself be enveloped in his hug, enjoying the feeling of security only her father could make her feel.

"He does, in an infuriatingly annoying sort of way...but yeah, he does". She said fondly, and Hopper rolled his eyes amusingly.

"If he gives you any trouble you just leave him to me, ok?"

She laughed and nodded.

"I'll keep that in mind, dad".

Finally, December 30th arrived and El flew to New York. She was more than excited to see Mike again and to spend New Year's Eve with him. He had refused to let her in on what they would be doing, claiming that the whole night was going to be a surprise she wouldn't

forget.

The thought did cross her mind that it could be a practical joke or something. Knowing Mike, she couldn't rule out that possibility. But, for the sake of her sanity, she elected to think that it would be a lovely –maybe even romantic–, surprise.

It was already 6 pm when El landed in New York. Her flight had been delayed and she was a bit tired, but the enthusiasm she felt at the prospect of seeing Mike soon, kept her from virtually falling asleep on her feet.

He was waiting for her in Arrivals, all nerves and a contagious goofy smile plastered on his face. Instantly, El's face broke into a huge grin as well, and she accelerated her pace to reach him faster. They almost tumbled to the ground as she launched herself into his arms, hugging him closely, immediately entranced by his familiar smell.

Home. She thought.

They pulled away slightly and kissed tenderly.

"Hi". He said softly, all timid smiles and flushed face.

"Hi". She responded, feeling giddy and warm inside.

God they were such a pair...Who would have thought he was such a sap?

"Home?"

"Yes, please".

He nodded, taking her carry on from her and tucking his other arm around her shoulders. El passed her arm round his waist and together they walked to the parking lot to get his car.

"Would you like to go somewhere for a bite to eat or are you too tired? I can cook us dinner as well, if you'd rather stay home". He asked as he fastened his seatbelt.

"I would prefer that if you don't mind. I'm sure your peanut butter sandwiches will be lovely". She said teasingly.

He laughed but pretended to be offended and gave her an indignant look.

"Hey! You know I can cook more than peanut butter sandwiches!"

"I know, I know" She grumbled, but smiled and kissed his cheek sweetly. "You are a wonderful cook, Mike".

"There. That's more like it".

"Don't let it get to your head, smug bastard".

The both laughed, and Mike took her hand kissed it.

"I missed you El". He confessed, looking at her deeply.

She blushed and caressed his cheek softly. "I missed you too".

They both smiled goofily.

Yep, they were pathetic.

And she loved it.

That night El had every intention of ravishing Mike. Though one thing was to want something and another thing entirely to be able to do something. She had fallen asleep the minute her head touched the back of the couch where she sat after having dinner. She was supposed to wait for Mike, nursing a glass of wine while he finished in the kitchen. Because yes, he had made dinner and he had washed the dishes. That's how awesome he was as a boyfriend.

"So, El..." He trailed off as he came into the living room and saw her peacefully asleep.

He chuckled and carefully removed the half empty glass from her hand placing it on the coffee table. Mike picked her up and carried her to his bed, removing her shoes and jeans first, then her top and bra. He pulled the cover over her and tucked her tightly, kissing her forehead as he went to prepare for bed himself.

Clad only in his boxers, he returned to bed, got under the covers and snuggled up to El.

And that's how she woke up the next morning, comfortably cuddled by Mike, absorbing in his heat and surrounded by his smell. She lifted her head and propped it on her elbow to observe him quietly. He looked peaceful when he slept, with a satisfied expression face, all freckles and unruly hair in his forehead. She ran her fingers through it, trying to keep it from his temple, but it stubbornly remained there; causing her to giggle softly.

Moments later her stomach growled, and she decided to get up and make some coffee. Kissing his nose tenderly she got up and went to the bathroom to go through her morning ablutions. She picked up his discarded shirt from last night and put it on, buttoning it up as she made her way to the kitchen.

Once there, she opened the freezer knowing it was highly likely that he had *Eggos* in his apartment. *Bingo!* Indeed, Mike had a considerable stash of her favorite waffles in the fridge. She then rummaged around the cupboards until she found the coffee, by chance finding also walnuts and maple syrup. She put on the coffeemaker and a couple of waffles in the toaster and went to get the paper to the front door.

With the coffee almost ready, she got the cream cheese out of the fridge and prepared her *Eggos* just the way she liked them. She poured herself some coffee and sat comfortably to eat her breakfast and read the paper.

Some short time later, El heard the rustle of the covers being thrown away and soon after the bathroom door closing. Getting up from her chair, she poured Mike a mug of fresh coffee and inserted two waffles in the toaster for him.

He padded to the kitchen a bit later and stood on threshold, just taking her in. She looked incredibly sexy standing in his kitchen, clad in nothing but his shirt and underwear. Mike smiled at her when he saw her look up from the mug she was holding. She blushed when she caught him looking and gave him a timid smile.

"Morning. I hope you don't mind, I got hungry". She said sheepishly, walking over to him and pecking him on the mouth, while handing him the coffee mug.

"Morning El! No worries make yourself at home". He said, sipping the proffered coffee. El smiled and took the waffles from the toaster and put them on a plate.

"Ah. I see you found my stash of *Eggos*". He said knowingly, as she handed him the plate.

"And the cheese cream, and the walnuts and the maple syrup!" He continued excitedly, clearly feeling complacent.

El seemed to grasp his meaning.

"Oh! You brought all this for me?"

"Of course! Gotta have what my girl likes".

She snorted at his response. "You're such a dork Mike". He smiled goofily, and she took the plate and mug from him, settling them on the table so she could kiss him properly.

El threw her arms around his neck, lowering his face to hers, as she brushed her lips to him softly. He pulled her to him, arms around her waist, tongue sneaking gently into her mouth.

Sighing contently, they pulled away.

She patted his chest lightly. "C'mon Romeo, everything is gonna go cold if we don't eat soon".

Mike chuckled and sat down next to her. He began to pour syrup, cheese cream and walnuts over his *Eggos*, under El's amused gaze.

"What? I want to try it your way".

She rolled her eyes but smiled just the same and casually sipped her coffee.

"Sooooooo, are you going to tell me what we are doing tonight?"

"No". He answered simply between bites.

"Mikeeeeeeee..." She whined, making her best puppy-dog eyes.

"Nah-ah, that's not going to work with me". He said shaking his head.

She just kept looking at him, almost at the brink of shedding crocodile tears, but he kept munching on his *Eggos* nonchalantly. Blatantly ignoring her.

"You were right, this is an awesome". He told her conversationally.

El huffed, exasperated.

"Goddammit Wheeler, you are one tough nut to crack!" She exclaimed in her best Hopper imitation.

"Sure I am". He said smugly and El snorted.

"Yeah right, keep telling yourself that. I haven't pulled out the big guns yet". She said sweetly, and he flinched as she dragged her fingers over his leg, dangerously caressing his inner thigh, almost reaching his crotch.

"Hey!"

"What?" She asked innocently.

"Hands off the goods!" He said as he brought his own hands to protect his genitals.

"Fine. Be that way". She said rolling her eyes and raising her hands in surrender.

Mike smiled and in a rush of affection leaned in to kiss her on the cheek quickly.

Surprised, El smiled shyly and went back to her coffee and paper.

Oh my god, sappiness all around...

After breakfast, the plan was to take a shower and leave the

apartment to one of Mike's secret activities for the day. Sadly, that didn't go so well as they ended up having sex for the best part of the morning.

"You are sabotaging my plans, aren't you?" Mike questioned as they finally made their way out of the apartment. El just looked at him innocently.

"I vividly remember YOU cornering me on my way to the shower". She said emphatically, poking his chest accusingly. He smiled and caught the hand poking him.

"It was so worth it though, wasn't it?" He said, almost conspiratorially.

"You bet it was". She told him, smiling suggestively and looping her arm around his to continue their way downstairs.

They had lunch at a little Italian restaurant that was a favorite of his and then they spent the afternoon walking around New York. They visited Central Park, Time's Square, the 5th Avenue and the Museum of Modern Art. They decided to go home early though, there were too many people in the streets due to being New Year's Eve, so Mike suggested they go home and rest before the night.

They got some sleep and by 8 pm that night they were ready to go out. Their mystery destination was a couple of blocks away from Mike's apartment, so they decided to walk. El spent the whole way trying to get Mike to tell her where they were going, though to no avail; he refused to reveal a thing. Soon, however, the surprise would be discovered, and she was giddy with excitement.

Finally, they arrived at a large ten-story building, going inside and taking the lift to the rooftop. As the doors opened, Mike covered El's eyes with his palms.

"Just a bit longer El".

She grumbled something unintelligible but complied, walking forward blindly, led only by Mike's hands. El felt the cool air hit her skin as they got out of the elevator and walked into what she

presumed was the rooftop. She could hear music playing on the background and enticing smell of food assaulted her nostrils.

And suddenly Mike's hands left her eyes and...

"Surprise!"

The whole Party was staring back at her smiling broadly.

El squealed in delight and ran towards them, trying to gather them in a group hug.

"Guys! I'm soooo happy to see you again!" She moaned, muffled by the strength of her hug.

"We are happy to see you too Ellie". Dustin muttered.

"Yeah El, it's been too long!" Max all but shouted into her ear.

"Did Mike put you up to this?" She asked as they pulled away from the hug and El took everything in.

The rooftop was decorated with garden lights, surrounded by colorful flowers and vines all around. There was a table filled with food and drinks, and music was playing from a Bluetooth speaker.

And the view of New York was just breathtaking.

"Yeah, lover boy here made the arrangements". Max answered grinning.

Mike just blushed and looked embarrassed.

"So, you and my boy Wheeler huh?" Lucas teased, putting arm around Max and picking up his beer.

El smiled and nodded.

"I heard it's you I have to thank for that".

Lucas chuckled lightly.

"Man, you don't know what a pain in the ass he was! Dustin and I

called him Emo Mike".

El giggled.

"I still resent that by the way. Mocking my pain, great friends you turned out to be!" He half-whined dramatically.

Dustin intervened in defense of the Party's honor.

"Oh no, no, no Mike, don't blame it on us if you let El here slip through your fingers. Mouthbreather!"

El rolled her eyes.

"That has already been established, Dustin. He is indeed a mouthbreather". She said as a matter of fact.

Mike gawked and gave her an indignant look of betrayal and they all laughed. Then they scattered around to sit in the chairs that were placed in a circle in the center of the roof. Lucas patted him on the back mockingly, leaving to pour them some drinks while he stood there wondering when exactly this had become 'Let's roast Mike' night.

El took pity on him and came closer, putting her arms around his waist and stepping on her tip toes to kiss the corner of his mouth softly.

"Thank you. Consider me thoroughly surprised". She told him, deeply grateful for his gesture.

He smiled but then thought better and shook his head.

"I'm revoking any rights you had to enjoy this surprise, not with that attitude Missy!" He mock-scolded her.

El snorted and let him go, raising her hands in surrender.

"Fine. No rights for me then". She said backing a few steps away from him.

"Sorry guys, I have to leave the party". She shouted. "Apparently I'm

not allowed to be here. Judge Mike has deemed me unworthy". They all looked at her amusedly and Mike chuckled at her exaggerated histrionics.

"Come here, you silly girl". He said affectionally, tugging at her hand and pulling her flush against him. She smiled and automatically got her arms around his neck, pulling his forehead to hers.

"You are very welcome El. I'm glad you like your surprise". Mike whispered, smiling at her.

"I love it". She whispered back, before pushing her lips to his softly. He responded happily and soon the kiss grew heated.

Though not for long, as Max thought it would be appropriate to break them off before they started having sex right then and there.

"You are so sickeningly cute I want to vomit". She said, and the others sniggered.

"Shut it Mayfield". Mike managed to mumble, while raising his right hand from El's hip to flip her off.

"Shut it Mayfield." Max mocked in a high-pitched voice.

"C'mon guys have a drink". Lucas offered, putting an end to the bickering he knew would ensue between Mike and his girlfriend.

Reluctantly, Mike and El broke apart, but remained staring at each other sweetly for a few more instants.

"Sorry Max". El apologized, looking sheepish. She took Mike's hand and dragged him to sit beside her in the circle of chairs.

Max nodded and observed them quietly.

"Oh my god it's like all the banter and sexual tension turned to mushiness!" She commented drily.

"Hey! We still tease each other like, a lot!" Mike said, trying to defend them. Poorly.

"Yes, but then you get all sappy about it! Eww!" Max retorted.

"Well...yeah it's true". He conceded, giving up and shrugging, before kissing El sweetly on the cheek just to annoy Max.

"Don't listen to her, she cried when El told her what happened with you two before Christmas". Lucas reassured him and they all giggled madly.

Max glared at Lucas and was about to scold him when Dustin cut her off.

"You are a softy Max, we all know it". Dustin assured her, patting her hand patronizingly.

Max narrowed her eyes at him but remained quiet. It was no use to try and deny it, she was so happy for El and well...yes, for Mike too. So she flipped him off instead.

"Calm down kids, is New Year's Eve!" Said the voice of reason, a.k.a. Will.

The night went on between laughter, teasing and memories from London. It was as if no time had passed since they left their beloved city, their home during that wonderful year. The talked excitedly about their lives after moving back and their plans for the future.

And soon the countdown for midnight begun.

They stood up and went to the edge of the roof to see the fireworks, while the DJ at the radio they had tuned into announced the final countdown.

"I'm so excited to begin this new year with you Mike". El told him from her place tucked in under his chin.

"Me too, El". He responded softly, kissing her forehead gently.

"3, 2, 1, Happy New Year!" The DJ shouted through the speaker.

Mike and El kissed and hugged happily, pulling away quickly to hug the rest of the Party.

"Happy New Year guys!" Dustin shouted excitedly, causing them all to laugh and shout back in return.

They stayed on the roof for a few more hours watching the fireworks, drinking champagne and celebrating their friendship and the year that had just begun.

They were happy.

AN/: Up next, the Epilogue. Thanks so much for sticking with the story, for your lovely reviews and support :D

15. Epilogue

Epilogue

Mike and El had been a couple for over six months now. Both were so happy that even the distance didn't seem to be a huge problem. They saw each other often, with El going to New York or Mike coming to Indianapolis on regular basis. Of course, the situation was not ideal, but they made do with what they had.

In fact, Mike had been seriously thinking about moving to Indiana for a while now, but hadn't had the guts to broach the subject with El. He had even been looking at apartments and jobs secretly. In the end the subject was brought to the table when, dazed in the afterglow of their lovemaking, he let it slip.

They had been talking about this great restaurant they had discovered over the weekend, perfect for brunch; and amidst all his excitement he hadn't thought before he spoke.

"When I live here we can go every couple of days and..." His rambling was interrupted even before he realized what he had said.

"What did you just say?"

Well, damn. he had slipped. He might as well just say it now, though he just knew he would be rambling awkwardly for the next five minutes at least.

"This is going to sound super creepy, but I've been thinking about moving here since our first weekend together. I just...had faith that this was going to work, and...and I didn't want you to forsake your life here, this is your dream job after all!" He prattled nervously, looking at her face to see her reaction. El was just staring at him wide-eyed.

"So yeah, I've kinda been thinking about it for a while". He finished sheepishly.

El was awestruck. Mike was thinking about moving here and leave

everything for her.

He was *that* serious about them. He had been *that* serious about them for a while now, apparently.

"Clearly, I wanted to ask you first, but..." He kept rambling on, even more anxious at her extended silence.

"God, I love you!" She told him before attacking his mouth passionately. The flow of affection she felt for him at that moment almost consumed her. Mike kept surprising her at every turn.

"Of course you do El". He told her smugly, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"Don't ruin this moment Michael". She chastised him jokingly.

He laughed and pulled her to him, hugging her tightly.

"So, I've been looking at some apartments near campus, they have pretty good prices and..." He trailed off when he saw her face worriedly surprised and filled with hesitation. "...hey, what's wrong?" He asked, suddenly concerned.

She cast her eyes down and took a moment before answering.

"No...I well, I thought...well I thought you could move in with me". She finished in a small voice, visibly nervous about her proposal.

"Move in? With you? As in...move in to your apartment?"

She nodded, not understanding why he was having such a hard time grasping the concept.

"Hmm...I don't know I would have to think about it". He said seriously, clearly hesitant.

"Oh". She said disbelievingly and a bit embarrassed. She had thought that it would be the most logical thing to do.

His face broke out into a huge grin and she knew she was being teased once again by Mike freaking Wheeler.

El just glared at him.

"A 'yes thank you El' would have sufficed". She said, obviously in a huff.

"And miss the look on your face?"

"Fine! Don't move in then!" She said trying to get up, but he yanked her to him and kissed her ardently, making her feel dizzy.

"Of course I'll move in with you Eleven. Nothing would make me happier". He told her after their kiss ended. "Thank you for offering me your home".

God he was sweet. Insufferable, but sweet.

El recovered enough to scowl at him and warn him fiercely.

"You are soooo meeting my father that after this!"

"Sure, I would love to meet your dad". He shrugged.

Mike didn't seem to understand the implications of meeting Hopper.
Poor thing...

Then it came to him.

"Wait, wait, why did that sound like a threat?" He asked, suddenly apprehensive.

"No reason. You're hearing things. My dad is the sweetest, you'll see". She said in her best sugarcoated voice.

He just looked at her suspiciously.

"I know that look and I know that voice! He is a monster who hates all your boyfriends, isn't he?"

She just kept smiling sweetly at him.

"Does he have a shotgun? Oh god, you did say he was a cop..." He looked like he was about to have a panic attack.

"Don't worry, he doesn't know anything about last year".

"Oh. That makes it so much better then..." He said unconvinced.

"Relax, he won't hurt you...much". She finished, before getting up and dashing into the bathroom, closing the door behind her and leaving Mike to ponder on that thought.

Less than a month later Mike was moving his things to El's apartment. He was still looking for a job though, but for the time being he was happy to be the homemaker while El was at work. He had a couple of interviews coming up so at least the search was going well.

The last of his boxes would be arriving in a couple of days to Indiana, but most of his clothes were here and he already felt like home. Of course, that's probably because of El but still, he liked the neighborhood, the apartment and the city.

The only thing he was dreading was finally meeting El's parents, specially her dad. They were visiting Hawkins today and he felt a bit nervous. He knew she was joking when she tried to scare him with her dad, but still, he wanted to make a good impression.

"Mike are you ready?" El's voice coming from the living room interrupted his thoughts. With a deep sigh he left the bedroom, preparing to face his destiny.

"Coming El".

"Are you ok? You're looking a bit pale". She said as he entered the room. El got closer and touched his forehead to check his temperature.

"I'm fine". He lied.

But El saw through the whole thing.

"They don't bite Mike, you'll be fine. You are practically perfect". She told him fondly, kissing the corner of his mouth affectionally.

He smiled and nodded, kissing her forehead.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence". He thanked her sincerely.

"You are very welcome. Now, c'mon or we'll be late". She said taking his hand and pulling out of the door.

An hour later they were parking the car in front of her parent's house. They got out and climbed the steps of the porch to knock on the door. Mike was fidgeting nervously on his feet and El took his hand reassuringly.

Suddenly the door opened, and they were greeted by a smiling blonde woman.

"Ellie!" She exclaimed hugging her.

Mike stood back watching the exchange warmly, until he noticed the tall, bearded man beside the door, right at the side of El's mom. He went a bit pale.

"Mom! It's so nice to see you".

And then El saw Hopper lingering in the back. His serious face changed into a warm smile the moment El locked eyes with him. She let go of her mother and stepped in to give her dad a hug.

"Hey Dad!"

"Hey El". He said hugging her, though not taking his eyes from Mike now that El wasn't looking.

She stepped back and walked towards Mike, taking his hand.

"This is Mike. Mike this is my mom Terry and the bear over there is my Dad, Hopper".

Hopper kept glaring at him, brow furrowed, sour expression on his face.

Mike gulped and felt his palms start to sweat.

"Nice to meet you Ms. and Mr. Hopper". He said politely, shaking their hands.

Hopper grunted.

"Jim be nice!" Terry admonished. "Nice to meet you Mike. Hmm...El did say you were handsome! And tall!" She told him embarrassing both him and El. He blushed furiously.

"Mom!"

"What? It's true!" She said shrugging. "C'mon let's get inside".

"You two go, we men are going to have a little chat outside". Hopper told them as he stepped into the porch carrying a small cooler.

"Dad..." El said cautiously.

"What? Don't worry Ellie, I just want to get to know him better". He said innocently.

"Be nice". She warned him. Hopper smiled sweetly and nodded.

She then looked at Mike.

"If you feel in danger, just give me a shout". She joked deviously.

"El you're not helping..." He almost whimpered. She chuckled and kissed his cheek before following her mother inside.

Against his will, Mike tuned his eyes to look at Hopper nervously. Only El could think of him as a sweet bear...

"So, umm sir..."

"Let's cut to the chase Wheeler". He interrupted, and Mike felt his stomach drop at his imposing tone.

"You are dating...no, scratch that, you are *living* with my little girl. My only daughter. Now, I know she is a grown woman, capable of choosing whomever she wants to date and to make her own decisions. But, if you ever hurt her or if this is only a game to you..."

His threat was suddenly cut off by Mike's voice, serious and stern.

"I love her". He said decidedly. "More than anything. And I will be the first one to reproach myself if I ever hurt her again". He finished bravely.

Mike wasn't going to lie, he was afraid of El's dad. But he would be damned if he was going to appear weak before him regarding his feelings for El.

"In fact, you shouldn't worry sir, it won't be long before I propose". He added confidently.

And Hopper almost choked on his beer.

"Jesus kid! You don't just spring something like that the first time you meet your girl's father!" Though he had to admit he was surprised about his confidence and the seriousness with which he seemed to approach the matter. The kid had guts.

El heard Hopper almost choking outside and yelled from the kitchen.

"Dad? You ok?" And after a moment she added sounding suspicious, "What did Mike do?"

"Nothing!" They both shouted at the same time, instantly gazing at each other, smirking lightly in complicity.

"We are going to get along you and me Wheeler". Hopper told him, still smirking.

"It seems we are, sir". Mike agreed, half smiling.

"Call me Hopper". He said casually, offering him a beer. Mike nodded and took it.

"So, tell me how did you two decide you were made for each other?"

Mike grimaced inwardly, it was going to be a long afternoon...

AN/: So that's it! Thanks so much for reading and reviewing. You've

all been amazing. Hope to be back soon with something new :)